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Chapter 45 - The Dust-Heap Disturbed

My head turned giddy. I was obliged to wait and let my overpowering agitation subside, before I could read any more.

Looking at the letter again, after an interval, my eyes fell accidentally on a sentence near the end, which surprised and startled me.

I stopped the driver of the carriage, at the entrance to the street in which our lodgings were situated, and told him to take me to the beautiful park of Paris--the famous Bois de Boulogne. My object was to gain time enough, in this way, to read the letter carefully through by myself, and to ascertain whether I ought or ought not to keep the receipt of it a secret before I confronted my husband and his mother at home.

This precaution taken, I read the narrative which my good Benjamin had so wisely and so thoughtfully written for me. Treating the various incidents methodically, he began with the Report which had arrived, in due course of mail, from our agent in America.

Our man had successfully traced the lodgekeeper's daughter and her husband to a small town in one of the Western States. Mr. Playmore's letter of introduction at once secured him a cordial reception from the married pair, and a patient hearing when he stated the object of his voyage across the Atlantic.

His first questions led to no very encouraging results. The woman was confused and surprised, and was apparently quite unable to exert her memory to any useful purpose. Fortunately, her husband proved to be a very intelligent man. He took the agent privately aside, and said to him, "I understand my wife, and you don't. Tell me exactly what it is you want to know, and leave it to me to discover how much she remembers and how much she forgets."

This sensible suggestion was readily accepted. The agent waited for events a day and a night.

Early the next morning the husband said to him, "Talk to my wife now, and you'll find she has something to tell you. Only mind this. Don't laugh at her when she speaks of trifles. She is half ashamed to speak of trifles, even to me. Think men are above such matters, you know. Listen quietly, and let her talk--and you will get at it all in that way."

The agent followed his instructions, and "got at it" as follows:

The woman remembered, perfectly well, being sent to clean the bedrooms and put them tidy, after the gentlefolks had all left Gleninch. Her mother had a bad hip at the time, and could not go with her and help her. She did not much fancy being alone in the great house, after what had happened in it. On her way to her work she passed two of the cottagers' children in the neighborhood at play in the park. Mr. Macallan was always kind to his poor tenants, and never objected to the young ones round about having a run on the grass. The two children idly followed her to the house. She took them inside, along with her--not liking the place, as already mentioned, and feeling that they would be company in the solitary rooms.

She began her work in the Guests' Corridor--leaving the room in the other corridor, in which the death had happened, to the last.

There was very little to do in the two first rooms. There was not litter enough, when she had swept the floors and cleaned the grates, to even half fill the housemaid's bucket which she carried with her. The children followed her about; and, all things considered, were "very good company" in the lonely place.

The third room (that is to say, the bedchamber which had been occupied by Miserrimus Dexter was in a much worse state than the other two, and wanted a great deal of tidying. She did not much notice the children here, being occupied with her work. The litter was swept up from the carpet, and the cinders and ashes were taken out of the grate, and the whole of it was in the bucket, when her attention was recalled to the children by hearing one of them cry.

She looked about the room without at first discovering them.

A fresh outburst of crying led her in the right direction, and showed her the children under a table in a corner of the room. The youngest of the two had got into a waste-paper basket. The eldest had found an old bottle of gum, with a brush fixed in the cork, and was gravely painting the face of the smaller child with what little remained of the contents of the bottle. Some natural struggles, on the part of the little creature, had ended in the overthrow of the basket, and the usual outburst of crying had followed as a matter of course.

In this state of things the remedy was soon applied. The woman took the bottle away from the eldest child, and gave it a "box on the ear." The younger one she set on its legs again, and she put the two "in the corner" to keep them quiet. This done, she swept up such fragments of the torn paper in the basket as had fallen on the floor; threw them back again into the basket, along with the gum-bottle; fetched the bucket, and emptied the basket into it; and then proceeded to the fourth and last room in the corridor, where she finished her work for that day.

Leaving the house, with the children after her, she took the filled bucket to the dust-heap, and emptied it in a hollow place among the rubbish, about half-way up the mound. Then she took the children home; and there was an end of it for the day.

Such was the result of the appeal made to the woman's memory of domestic events at Gleninch.

The conclusion at which Mr. Playmore arrived, from the facts submitted to him, was that the chances were now decidedly in favor of the recovery of the letter. Thrown in, nearly midway between the contents of the housemaid's bucket, the torn morsels would be protected above as well as below, when they were emptied on the dust-heap.

Succeeding weeks and months would add to that protection, by adding to the accumulated refuse. In the neglected condition of the grounds, the dust-heap had not been disturbed in search of manure. There it had stood, untouched, from the time when the family left Gleninch to the present day. And there, hidden deep somewhere in the mound, the fragments of the letter must be.

Such were the lawyer's conclusions. He had written immediately to communicate them to Benjamin. And, thereupon, what had Benjamin done?

After having tried his powers of reconstruction on his own correspondence, the prospect of experimenting on the mysterious letter itself had proved to be a temptation too powerful for the old man to resist. "I almost fancy, my dear, this business of yours has bewitched me," he wrote. "You see I have the misfortune to be an idle man. I have time to spare and money to spare. And the end of it is that I am here at Gleninch, engaged on my own sole responsibility (with good Mr. Playmore's permission) in searching the dust-heap!"

Benjamin's description of his first view of the field of action at Gleninch followed these characteristic lines of apology.

I passed over the description without ceremony. My remembrance of the scene was too vivid to require any prompting of that sort. I saw again, in the dim evening light, the unsightly mound which had so strangely attracted my attention at Gleninch. I heard again the words in which Mr. Playmore had explained to me the custom of the dust-heap in Scotch country-houses. What had Benjamin and Mr. Playmore done? What had Benjamin and Mr. Playmore found? For me, the true interest of the narrative was there--and to that portion of it I eagerly turned next.

They had proceeded methodically, of course, with one eye on the pounds, shillings, and pence, and the other on the object in view. In Benjamin, the lawyer had found what he had not met with in me--a sympathetic mind, alive to the value of "an abstract of the expenses," and conscious of that most remunerative of human virtues, the virtue of economy.

At so much a week, they had engaged men to dig into the mound and to sift the ashes. At so much a week, they had hired a tent to shelter the open dust-heap from wind and weather. At so much a week, they had engaged the services of a young man (personally known to Benjamin), who was employed in a laboratory under a professor of chemistry, and who had distinguished himself by his skillful manipulation of paper in a recent case of forgery on a well-known London firm. Armed with these preparations, they had begun the work; Benjamin and the young chemist living at Gleninch, and taking it in turns to superintend the proceedings.

Three days of labor with the spade and the sieve produced no results of the slightest importance. However, the matter was in the hands of two quietly determined men. They declined to be discouraged. They went on.

On the fourth day the first morsels of paper were found.

Upon examination, they proved to be the fragments of a tradesman's prospectus. Nothing dismayed, Benjamin and the young chemist still persevered. At the end of the day's work more pieces of paper were turned up. These proved to be covered with written characters. Mr. Playmore (arriving at Gleninch, as usual, every evening on the conclusion of his labors in the law) was consulted as to the handwriting. After careful examination, he declared that the mutilated portions of sentences submitted to him had been written, beyond all doubt, by Eustace Macallan's first wife!

This discovery aroused the enthusiasm of the searchers to fever height.

Spades and sieves were from that moment forbidden utensils. However unpleasant the task might be, hands alone were used in the further examination of the mound. The first and foremost necessity was to place the morsels of paper (in flat cardboard boxes prepared for the purpose) in their order as they were found. Night came; the laborers were dismissed; Benjamin and his two colleagues worked on by lamplight. The morsels of paper were now turned up by dozens, instead of by ones and twos. For a while the search prospered in this way; and then the morsels appeared no more. Had they all been recovered? or would renewed hand-digging yield more yet? The next light layers of rubbish were carefully removed--and the grand discovery of the day followed. There (upside down) was the gum-bottle which the lodge-keeper's daughter had spoken of. And, more precious still, there, under it, were more fragments of written paper, all stuck together in a little lump, by the last drippings from the gum-bottle dropping upon them as they lay on the dust-heap!

The scene now shifted to the interior of the house. When the searchers next assembled they met at the great table in the library at Gleninch.

Benjamin's experience with the "Puzzles" which he had put together in the days of his boyhood proved to be of some use to his companions. The fragments accidentally stuck together would, in all probability, be found to fit each other, and would certainly (in any case) be the easiest fragments to reconstruct as a center to start from.

The delicate business of separating these pieces of paper, and of preserving them in the order in which they had adhered to each other, was assigned to the practiced fingers of the chemist. But the difficulties of his task did not end here. The writing was (as usual in letters) traced on both sides of the paper, and it could only be preserved for the purpose of reconstruction by splitting each morsel into two--so as artificially to make a blank side, on which could be spread the fine cement used for reuniting the fragments in their original form.

To Mr. Playmore and Benjamin the prospect of successfully putting the letter together, under these disadvantages, seemed to be almost hopeless. Their skilled colleague soon satisfied them that they were wrong.

He drew their attention to the thickness of the paper--note-paper of the strongest and best quality--on which the writing was traced. It was of more than twice the substance of the last paper on which he had operated, when he was engaged in the forgery ease; and it was, on that account, comparatively easy for him (aided by the mechanical appliances which he had brought from London) to split the morsels of the torn paper, within a given space of time which might permit them to begin the reconstruction of the letter that night.

With these explanations, he quietly devoted himself to his work. While Benjamin and the lawyer were still poring over the scattered morsels of the letter which had been first discovered, and trying to piece them together again, the chemist had divided the greater part of the fragments specially confided to him into two halves each; and had correctly put together some five or six sentences of the letter on the smooth sheet of cardboard prepared for that purpose.

They looked eagerly at the reconstructed writing so far.

It was correctly done: the sense was perfect. The first result gained by examination was remarkable enough to reward them for all their exertions. The language used plainly identified the person to whom the late Mrs. Eustace had addressed her letter.

That person was--my husband.

And the letter thus addressed--if the plainest circumstantial evidence could be trusted--was identical with the letter which Miserrimus Dexter had suppressed until the Trial was over, and had then destroyed by tearing it up.

These were the discoveries that had been made at the time when Benjamin wrote to me. He had been on the point of posting his letter, when Mr. Playmore had suggested that he should keep it by him for a few days longer, on the chance of having more still to tell me.

"We are indebted to her for these results," the lawyer had said. "But for her resolution; and her influence over Miserrimus Dexter, we should never have discovered what the dust-heap was hiding from us--we should never have seen so much as a glimmering of the truth. She has the first claim to the fullest information. Let her have it."

The letter had been accordingly kept back for three days. That interval being at an end, it was hurriedly resumed and concluded in terms which indescribably alarmed me.

"The chemist is advancing rapidly with his part of the work" (Benjamin wrote); "and I have succeeded in putting together a separate portion of the torn writing which makes sense. Comparison of what he has accomplished with what I have accomplished has led to startling conclusions. Unless Mr. Playmore and I are entirely wrong (and God grant we may be so!), there is a serious necessity for your keeping the reconstruction of the letter strictly secret from everybody about you. The disclosures suggested by what has come to light are so heartrending and so dreadful that I cannot bring myself to write about them until I am absolutely obliged to do so. Please forgive me for disturbing you with this news. We are bound, sooner or later, to consult with you in the matter; and we think it right to prepare your mind for what may be to come."

To this there was added a postscript in Mr. Playmore's handwriting:

"Pray observe strictly the caution which Mr. Benjamin impresses on you. And bear this in mind, as a warning from _me:_ If we succeed in reconstructing the entire letter, the last person living who ought (in my opinion) to be allowed to see it is--your husband."