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Chapter 34 - Gleninch

"AHA!" said Benjamin, complacently. "So the lawyer thinks, as I do, that you will be highly imprudent if you go back to Mr. Dexter? A hard-headed, sensible man the lawyer, no doubt. You will listen to Mr. Playmore, won't you, though you wouldn't listen to me?"

(I had of course respected Mr. Playmore's confidence in me when Benjamin and I met on my return to the hotel. Not a word relating to the lawyer's horrible suspicion of Miserrimus Dexter had passed my lips.)

"You must forgive me, my old friend," I said, answering Benjamin. "I am afraid it has come to this--try as I may, I can listen to nobody who advises me. On our way here I honestly meant to be guided by Mr. Playmore--we should never have taken this long journey if I had not honestly meant it. I have tried, tried hard to be a teachable, reasonable woman. But there is something in me that won't be taught. I am afraid I shall go back to Dexter."

Even Benjamin lost all patience with me this time.

"What is bred in the bone," he said, quoting the old proverb, "will never come out of the flesh. In years gone by, you were the most obstinate child that ever made a mess in a nursery. Oh, dear me, we might as well have stayed in London."

"No," I replied, "now we have traveled to Edinburgh, we will see something (interesting to _me_ at any rate) which we should never have seen if we had not left London. My husband's country-house is within a few miles of us here. To-morrow--we will go to Gleninch."

"Where the poor lady was poisoned?" asked Benjamin, with a look of dismay. "You mean that place?"

"Yes. I want to see the room in which she died; I want to go all over the house."

Benjamin crossed his hands resignedly on his lap. "I try to understand the new generation," said the old man, sadly; "but I can't manage it. The new generation beats me."

I sat down to write to Mr. Playmore about the visit to Gleninch. The house in which the tragedy had occurred that had blighted my husband's life was, to my mind, the most interesting house on the habitable globe. The prospect of visiting Gleninch had, indeed (to tell the truth), strongly influenced my resolution to consult the Edinburgh lawyer. I sent my note to Mr. Playmore by a messenger, and received the kindest reply in return. If I would wait until the afternoon, he would get the day's business done, and would take us to Gleninch in his own carriage.

Benjamin's obstinacy--in its own quiet way, and on certain occasions only--was quite a match for mine. He had privately determined, as one of the old generation, to have nothing to do with Gleninch. Not a word on the subject escaped him until Mr. Playmore's carriage was at the hotel door. At that appropriate moment Benjamin remembered an old friend of his in Edinburgh. "Will you please to excuse me, Valeria? My friend's name is Saunders; and he will take it unkindly of me if I don't dine with him to-day."

Apart from the associations that I connected with it, there was nothing to interest a traveler at Gleninch.

The country around was pretty and well cultivated, and nothing more. The park was, to an English eye, wild and badly kept. The house had been built within the last seventy or eighty years. Outside, it was as bare of all ornament as a factory, and as gloomily heavy in effect as a prison. Inside, the deadly dreariness, the close, oppressive solitude of a deserted dwelling wearied the eye and weighed on the mind, from the roof to the basement. The house had been shut up since the time of the Trial. A lonely old couple, man and wife, had the keys and the charge of it. The man shook his head in silent and sorrowful disapproval of our intrusion when Mr. Playmore ordered him to open the doors and shutters, and let the light in on the dark, deserted place. Fires were burning in the library and the picture-gallery, to preserve the treasures which they contained from the damp. It was not easy, at first, to look at the cheerful blaze without fancying that the inhabitants of the house must surely come in and warm themselves. Ascending to the upper floor, I saw the rooms made familiar to me by the Report of the Trial. I entered the little study, with the old books on the shelves, and the key still missing from the locked door of communication with the bedchamber. I looked into the room in which the unhappy mistress of Gleninch had suffered and died. The bed was left in its place; the sofa on which the nurse had snatched her intervals of repose was at its foot; the Indian cabinet, in which the crumpled paper with the grains of arsenic had been found, still held its little collection of curiosities. I moved on its pivot the invalid-table on which she had taken her meals and written her poems, poor soul. The place was dreary and dreadful; the heavy air felt as if it were still burdened with its horrid load of misery and distrust. I was glad to get out (after a passing glance at the room which Eustace had occupied in those days) into the Guests' Corridor. There was the bedroom, at the door of which Miserrimus Dexter had waited and watched. There was the oaken floor along which he had hopped, in his horrible way, following the footsteps of the servant disguised in her mistress's clothes. Go where I might, the ghosts of the dead and the absent were with me, step by step. Go where I might, the lonely horror of the house had its still and awful voice for Me: "_I_ keep the secret of the Poison! _I_ hide the mystery of the death!"

The oppression of the place became unendurable. I longed for the pure sky and the free air. My companion noticed and understood me.

"Come," he said. "We have had enough of the house. Let us look at the grounds."

In the gray quiet of the evening we roamed about the lonely gardens, and threaded our way through the rank, neglected shrubberies. Wandering here and wandering there, we drifted into the kitchen garden--with one little patch still sparsely cultivated by the old man and his wife, and all the rest a wilderness of weeds. Beyond the far end of the garden, divided from it by a low paling of wood, there stretched a patch of waste ground, sheltered on three sides by trees. In one lost corner of the ground an object, common enough elsewhere, attracted my attention here. The object was a dust-heap. The great size of it, and the curious situation in which it was placed, aroused a moment's languid curiosity in me. I stopped, and looked at the dust and ashes, at the broken crockery and the old iron. Here there was a torn hat, and there some fragments of rotten old boots, and scattered around a small attendant litter of torn paper and frowzy rags.

"What are you looking at?" asked Mr. Playmore.

"At nothing more remarkable than the dust-heap," I answered.

"In tidy England, I suppose, you would have all that carted away out of sight," said the lawyer. "We don't mind in Scotland, as long as the dust-heap is far enough away not to be smelt at the house. Besides, some of it, sifted, comes in usefully as manure for the garden. Here the place is deserted, and the rubbish in consequence has not been disturbed. Everything at Gleninch, Mrs. Eustace (the big dust-heap included), is waiting for the new mistress to set it to rights. One of these days you may be queen here--who knows?"

"I shall never see this place again," I said.

"Never is a long day," returned my companion. "And time has its surprises in store for all of us."

We turned away, and walked back in silence to the park gate, at which the carriage was waiting.

On the return to Edinburgh, Mr. Playmore directed the conversation to topics entirely unconnected with my visit to Gleninch. He saw that my mind stood in need of relief; and he most good-naturedly, and successfully, exerted himself to amuse me. It was not until we were close to the city that he touched on the subject of my return to London.

"Have you decided yet on the day when you leave Edinburgh?" he asked.

"We leave Edinburgh," I replied, "by the train of to-morrow morning."

"Do you still see no reason to alter the opinions which you expressed yesterday? Does your speedy departure mean that?"

"I am afraid it does, Mr. Playmore. When I am an older woman, I may be a wiser woman. In the meantime, I can only trust to your indulgence if I still blindly blunder on in my own way."

He smiled pleasantly, and patted my hand--then changed on a sudden, and looked at me gravely and attentively before he opened his lips again.

"This is my last opportunity of speaking to you before you go," he said. "May I speak freely?"

"As freely as you please, Mr. Playmore. Whatever you may say to me will only add to my grateful sense of your kindness."

"I have very little to say, Mrs. Eustace--and that little begins with a word of caution. You told me yesterday that, when you paid your last visit to Miserrimus Dexter, you went to him alone. Don't do that again. Take somebody with you."

"Do you think I am in any danger, then?"

"Not in the ordinary sense of the word. I only think that a friend may be useful in keeping Dexter's audacity (he is one of the most impudent men living) within proper limits. Then, again, in case anything worth remembering and acting on _should_ fall from him in his talk, a friend may be valuable as witness. In your place, I should have a witness with me who could take notes--but then I am a lawyer, and my business is to make a fuss about trifles. Let me only say--go with a companion when you next visit Dexter; and be on your guard against yourself when your talk turns on Mrs. Beaulieu."

"On my guard against myself? What do you mean?"

"Practice, my dear Mrs. Eustace, has given me an eye for the little weaknesses of human nature. You are (quite naturally) disposed to be jealous of Mrs. Beaulieu; and you are, in consequence, not in full possession of your excellent common-sense when Dexter uses that lady as a means of blindfolding you. Am I speaking too freely?"

"Certainly not. It is very degrading to me to be jealous of Mrs. Beaulieu. My vanity suffers dreadfully when I think of it. But my common-sense yields to conviction. I dare say you are right."

"I am delighted to find that we agree on one point," he rejoined, dryly. "I don't despair yet of convincing you in that far more serious matter which is still in dispute between us. And, what is more, if you will throw no obstacles in the way, I look to Dexter himself to help me."

This aroused my curiosity. How Miserrimus Dexter could help him, in that or in any other way, was a riddle beyond my reading.

"You propose to repeat to Dexter all that Lady Clarinda told you about Mrs. Beaulieu," he went on. "And you think it is likely that Dexter will be overwhelmed, as you were overwhelmed, when he hears the story. I am going to venture on a prophecy. I say that Dexter will disappoint you. Far from showing any astonishment, he will boldly tell you that you have been duped by a deliberately false statement of facts, invented and set afloat, in her own guilty interests, by Mrs. Beaulieu. Now tell me--if he really try, in that way, to renew your unfounded suspicion of an innocent woman, will _that_ shake your confidence in your own opinion?"

"It will entirely destroy my confidence in my own opinion, Mr. Playmore."

"Very good. I shall expect you to write to me, in any case; and I believe we shall be of one mind before the week is out. Keep strictly secret all that I said to you yesterday about Dexter. Don't even mention my name when you see him. Thinking of him as I think now, I would as soon touch the hand of the hangman as the hand of that monster! God bless you! Good-by."

So he said his farewell words, at the door of the hotel. Kind, genial, clever--but oh, how easily prejudiced, how shockingly obstinate in holding to his own opinion! And _what_ an opinion! I shuddered as I thought of it.