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Chapter 39 - On The Way To Dexter

"I DECLARE to Heaven, Valeria, I believe that monster's madness is infectious--and you have caught it!"

This was Benjamin's opinion of me (on my safe arrival at the villa) after I had announced my intention of returning Miserrimus Dexter's visit, in his company.

Being determined to carry my point, I could afford to try the influence of mild persuasion. I begged my good friend to have a little patience with me. "And do remember what I have already told you," I added. "It is of serious importance to me to see Dexter again."

I only heaped fuel on the fire. "See him again?" Benjamin repeated indignantly. "See him, after he grossly insulted you, under my roof, in this very room? I can't be awake; I must be asleep and dreaming!"

It was wrong of me, I know. But Benjamin's virtuous indignation was so very virtuous that it let the spirit of mischief loose in me. I really could not resist the temptation to outrage his sense of propriety by taking an audaciously liberal view of the whole matter.

"Gently, my good friend, gently," I said. "We must make allowances for a man who suffers under Dexter's infirmities, and lives Dexter's life. And really we must not let our modesty lead us beyond reasonable limits. I begin to think that I took rather a prudish view of the thing myself at the time. A woman who respects herself, and whose whole heart is with her husband, is not so very seriously injured when a wretched crippled creature is rude enough to put his arm around her waist. Virtuous indignation (if I may venture to say so) is sometimes very cheap indignation. Besides, I have forgiven him--and you must forgive him too. There is no fear of his forgetting himself again, while you are with me. His house is quite a curiosity--it is sure to interest you; the pictures alone are worth the journey. I will write to him to-day, and we will go and see him together to-morrow. We owe it to ourselves (if we don't owe it to Mr. Dexter) to pay this visit. If you will look about you, Benjamin, you will see that benevolence toward everybody is the great virtue of the time we live in. Poor Mr. Dexter must have the benefit of the prevailing fashion. Come, come, march with the age! Open your mind to the new ideas!"

Instead of accepting this polite invitation, worthy old Benjamin flew at the age we lived in like a bull at a red cloth.

"Oh, the new ideas! the new ideas! By all manner of means, Valeria, let us have the new ideas! The old morality's all wrong, the old ways are all worn out. Let's march with the age we live in. Nothing comes amiss to the age we live in. The wife in England and the husband in Spain, married or not married living together or not living together--it's all one to the new ideas. I'll go with you, Valeria; I'll be worthy of the generation I live in. When we have done with Dexter, don't let's do things by halves. Let's go and get crammed with ready made science at a lecture--let's hear the last new professor, the man who has been behind the scenes at Creation, and knows to a T how the world was made, and how long it took to make it. There's the other fellow, too: mind we don't forget the modern Solomon, who has left his proverbs behind him--the brand-new philosopher who considers the consolations of religion in the light of harmless playthings, and who is kind enough to say that he might have been all the happier if he could only have been childish enough to play with them himself. Oh, the new ideas! the new ideas!--what consoling, elevating, beautiful discoveries have been made by the new ideas! We were all monkeys before we were men, and molecules before we were monkeys! and what does it matter? And what does anything matter to anybody? I'm with you, Valeria, I'm ready. The sooner the better. Come to Dexter! Come to Dexter!"

"I am so glad you agree with me," I said. "But let us do nothing in a hurry. Three o'clock to-morrow will be time enough for Mr. Dexter. I will write at once and tell him to expect us. Where are you going?"

"I am going to clear my mind of cant," said Benjamin, sternly. "I am going into the library."

"What are you going to read?"

"I am going to read--Puss in Boots, and Jack and the Bean-stalk, and anything else I can find that doesn't march with the age we live in."

With that parting shot at the new ideas, my old friend left me for a time.

Having dispatched my note, I found myself beginning to revert, with a certain feeling of anxiety, to the subject of Miserrimus Dexter's health. How had he passed through the interval of my absence from England? Could anybody, within my reach, tell me news of him? To inquire of Benjamin would only be to provoke a new outbreak. While I was still considering, the housekeeper entered the room on some domestic errand. I asked, at a venture, if she had heard anything more, while I had been away of the extraordinary person who had so seriously alarmed her on a former occasion.

The housekeeper shook her head, and looked as if she thought it in bad taste to mention the subject at all.

"About a week after you had gone away ma'am," she said, with extreme severity of manner, and with excessive carefulness in her choice of words, "the Person you mentioned had the impudence to send a letter to you. The messenger was informed, by my master's orders, that you had gone abroad, and he and his letter were both sent about their business together. Not long afterward, ma'am, I happened, while drinking tea with Mrs. Macallan's housekeeper, to hear of the Person again. He himself called in his chaise, at Mrs. Macallan's, to inquire about you there. How he can contrive to sit, without legs to balance him, is beyond my understanding--but that is neither here nor there. Legs or no legs, the housekeeper saw him, and she says, as I say, she will never forget him to her dying day. She told him (as soon as she recovered herself) of Mr. Eustace's illness, and of you and Mrs. Macallan being in foreign parts nursing him. He went away, so the housekeeper told me, with tears in his eyes, and oaths and curses on his lips--a sight shocking to see. That's all I know about the Person, ma'am, and I hope to be excused if I venture to say that the subject is (for good reasons) extremely disagreeable to me."

She made a formal courtesy, and quitted the room.

Left by myself, I felt more anxious and more uncertain than ever when I thought of the experiment that was to be tried on the next day. Making due allowance for exaggeration, the description of Miserrimus Dexter on his departure from Mrs. Macallan's house suggested that he had not endured my long absence very patiently, and

that he was still as far as ever from giving his shattered nervous system its fair chance of repose.

The next morning brought me Mr. Playmore's reply to the letter which I had addressed to him from Paris.

He wrote very briefly, neither approving nor blaming my decision, but strongly reiterating his opinion that I should do well to choose a competent witness as my companion at my coming interview with Dexter. The most interesting part of the letter was at the end. "You must be prepared," Mr. Playmore wrote, "to see a change for the worse in Dexter. A friend of mine was with him on a matter of business a few days since, and was struck by the alteration in him. Your presence is sure to have its effect, one way or another. I can give you no instructions for managing him--you must be guided by the circumstances. Your own tact will tell you whether it is wise or not to encourage him to speak of the late Mrs. Eustace. The chances of his betraying himself all revolve (as I think) round that one topic: keep him to it if you can." To this was added, in a postscript: "Ask Mr. Benjamin if he were near enough to the library door to hear Dexter tell you of his entering the bedchamber on the night of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death."

I put the question to Benjamin when we met at the luncheon-table before setting forth for the distant suburb in which Miserrimus Dexter lived. My old friend disapproved of the contemplated expedition as strongly as ever. He was unusually grave and unusually sparing of his words when he answered me.

"I am no listener," he said. "But some people have voices which insist on being heard. Mr. Dexter is one of them."

"Does that mean that you heard him?" I asked.

"The door couldn't muffle him, and the wall couldn't muffle him," Benjamin rejoined. "I heard him--and I thought it infamous. There!"

"I may want you to do more than hear him this time," I ventured to say. "I may want you to make notes of our conversation while Mr. Dexter is speaking to me. You used to write down what my father said, when he was dictating his letters to you. Have you got one of your little note-books to spare?"

Benjamin looked up from his plate with an aspect of stern surprise.

"It's one thing," he said, "to write under the dictation of a great merchant, conducting a vast correspondence by which thousands of pounds change hands in due course of post. And it's another thing to take down the gibberish of a maundering mad monster who ought to be kept in a cage. Your good father, Valeria, would never have asked me to do that."

"Forgive me, Benjamin; I must really ask you to do it. You may be of the greatest possible use to me. Come, give way this once, dear, for my sake."

Benjamin looked down again at his plate, with a rueful resignation which told me that I had carried my point.

"I have been tied to her apron-string all my life," I heard him grumble to himself; "and it's too late in the day to get loose from her how." He looked up again at me. "I thought I had retired from business," he said; "but it seems I must turn clerk again. Well? What is the new stroke of work that's expected from me this time?"

The cab was announced to be waiting for us at the gate as he asked the question. I rose and took his arm, and gave him a grateful kiss on his rosy old cheek.

"Only two things," I said. "Sit down behind Mr. Dexter's chair, so that he can't see you. But take care to place yourself, at the same time, so that you can see me."

"The less I see of Mr. Dexter the better I shall be pleased," growled Benjamin. "What am I to do after I have taken my place behind him?"

"You are to wait until I make you a sign; and when you see it you are to begin writing down in your note-book what Mr. Dexter is saying--and you are to go on until I make another sign, which means, Leave off!"

"Well?" said Benjamin, "what's the sign for Begin? and what's the sign for Leave off?"

I was not quite prepared with an answer to this. I asked him to help me with a hint. No! Benjamin would take no active part in the matter. He was resigned to be employed in the capacity of passive instrument--and there all concession ended, so far as he was concerned.

Left to my own resources, I found it no easy matter to invent a telegraphic system which should sufficiently inform Benjamin, without awakening Dexter's quick suspicion. I looked into the glass to see if I could find the necessary suggestion in anything that I wore. My earrings supplied me with the idea of which I was in search.

"I shall take care to sit in an arm-chair," I said. "When you see me rest my elbow on the chair, and lift my hand to my earring, as if I were playing with it--write down what he says; and go on until--well, suppose we say, until you hear me move my chair. At that sound, stop. You understand me?"

"I understand you."

We started for Dexter's house.