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Chapter 22 - The Major Makes Difficulties

As I opened the dining-room door the Major hastened to meet me. He looked the brightest and the youngest of living elderly gentlemen, with his smart blue frock-coat, his winning smile, his ruby ring, and his ready compliment. It was quite cheering to meet the modern Don Juan once more.

"I don't ask after your health," said the old gentleman; "your eyes answer me, my dear lady, before I can put the question. At your age a long sleep is the true beauty-draught. Plenty of bed--there is the simple secret of keeping your good looks and living a long life--plenty of bed!"

"I have not been so long in my bed, Major, as you suppose. To tell the truth, I have been up all night, reading."

Major Fitz-David lifted his well-painted eyebrows in polite surprise.

"What is the happy book which has interested you so deeply?" he asked.

"The book," I answered, "is the Trial of my husband for the murder of his first wife."

"Don't mention that horrid book!" he exclaimed. "Don't speak of that dreadful subject! What have beauty and grace to do with Trials, Poisonings, Horrors? Why, my charming friend, profane your lips by talking of such things? Why frighten away the Loves and the Graces that lie hid in your smile. Humor an old fellow who adores the Loves and the Graces, and who asks nothing better than to sun himself in your smiles. Luncheon is ready. Let us be cheerful. Let us laugh and lunch."

He led me to the table, and filled my plate and my glass with the air of a man who considered himself to be engaged in one of the most important occupations of his life. Benjamin kept the conversation going in the interval.

"Major Fitz-David brings you some news, my dear," he said. "Your mother-in-law, Mrs. Macallan, is coming here to see you to-day."

My mother-in-law coming to see me! I turned eagerly to the Major for further information.

"Has Mrs. Macallan heard anything of my husband?" I asked. "Is she coming here to tell me about him?"

"She has heard from him, I believe," said the Major, "and she has also heard from your uncle the vicar. Our excellent Starkweather has written to her--to what purpose I have not been informed. I only know that on receipt of his letter she has decided on paying you a visit. I met the old lady last night at a party, and I tried hard to discover whether she were coming to you as your friend or your enemy. My powers of persuasion were completely thrown away on her. The fact is," said the Major, speaking in the character of a youth of five-and-twenty making a modest confession, "I don't get on well with old women. Take the will for the deed, my sweet friend. I have tried to be of some use to you and have failed."

Those words offered me the opportunity for which I was waiting. I determined not to lose it.

"You can be of the greatest use to me," I said, "if you will allow me to presume, Major, on your past kindness. I want to ask you a question; and I may have a favor to beg when you have answered me."

Major Fitz-David set down his wine-glass on its way to his lips, and looked at me with an appearance of breathless interest.

"Command me, my dear lady--I am yours and yours only," said the gallant old gentleman. "What do you wish to ask me?"

"I wish to ask if you know Miserrimus Dexter."

"Good Heavens!" cried the Major; "that _is_ an unexpected question! Know Miserrimus Dexter? I have known him for more years than I like to reckon up. What _can_ be your object--"

"I can tell you what my object is in two words," I interposed. "I want you to give me an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter."

My impression is that the Major turned pale under his paint. This, at any rate, is certain--his sparkling little gray eyes looked at me in undisguised bewilderment and alarm.

"You want to know Miserrimus Dexter?" he repeated, with the air of a man who doubted the evidence of his own senses. "Mr. Benjamin, have I taken too much of your excellent wine? Am I the victim of a delusion--or did our fair friend really ask me to give her an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter?"

Benjamin looked at me in some bewilderment on his side, and answered, quite seriously,

"I think you said so, my dear."

"I certainly said so," I rejoined. "What is there so very surprising in my request?"

"The man is mad!" cried the Major. "In all England you could not have picked out a person more essentially unfit to be introduced to a lady--to a young lady especially--than Miserrimus Dexter. Have you heard of his horrible deformity?"

"I have heard of it--and it doesn't daunt me."

"Doesn't daunt you? My dear lady, the man's mind is as deformed as his body. What Voltaire said satirically of the character of his countrymen in general is literally true of Miserrimus Dexter. He is a mixture of the tiger and the monkey. At one moment he would frighten you, and at the next he would set you screaming with laughter. I don't deny that he is clever in some respects--brilliantly clever, I admit. And I don't say that he has ever committed any acts of violence, or ever willingly injured anybody. But, for all that, he is mad, if ever a man were mad yet. Forgive me if the inquiry is impertinent. What can your motive possibly be for wanting an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter?"

"I want to consult him?"

"May I ask on what subject?"

"On the subject of my husband's Trial."

Major Fitz-David groaned, and sought a momentary consolation in his friend Benjamin's claret.

"That dreadful subject again!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Benjamin, why does she persist in dwelling on that dreadful subject?"

"I must dwell on what is now the one employment and the one hope of my life," I said. "I have reason to hope that Miserrimus Dexter can help me to clear my husband's character of the stain which the Scotch Verdict has left on it. Tiger and monkey as he may be, I am ready to run the risk of being introduced to him. And I ask you again--rashly and obstinately as I fear you will think--to give me the introduction. It will put you to no inconvenience. I won't trouble you to escort me; a letter to Mr. Dexter will do."

The Major looked piteously at Benjamin, and shook his head. Benjamin looked piteously at the Major, and shook his head.

"She appears to insist on it," said the Major.

"Yes," said Benjamin. "She appears to insist on it."

"I won't take the responsibility, Mr. Benjamin, of sending her alone to Miserrimus Dexter."

"Shall I go with her, sir?"

The Major reflected. Benjamin, in the capacity of protector, did not appear to inspire our military friend with confidence. After a moment's consideration a new idea seemed to strike him. He turned to me.

"My charming friend," he said, "be more charming than ever--consent to a compromise. Let us treat this difficulty about Dexter from a social point of view. What do you say to a little dinner?"

"A little dinner?" I repeated, not in the least understanding him.

"A little dinner," the Major reiterated, "at my house. You insist on my introducing you to Dexter, and I refuse to trust you alone with th at crack-brained personage. The only alternative under the circumstances is to invite him to meet you, and to let you form your own opinion of him--under the protection of my roof. Who shall we have to meet you besides?" pursued the Major, brightening with hospitable intentions. "We want a perfect galaxy of beauty around the table, as a species of compensation when we have got Miserrimus Dexter as one the guests. Madame Mirliflore is still in London. You would be sure to like her--she is charming; she possesses your firmness, your extraordinary tenacity of purpose. Yes, we will have Madame Mirliflore. Who else? Shall we say Lady Clarinda? Another charming person, Mr. Benjamin! You would be sure to admire her--she is so sympathetic, she resembles in so many respects our fair friend here. Yes, Lady Clarinda shall be one of us; and you shall sit next to her, Mr. Benjamin, as a proof of my sincere regard for you. Shall we have my young prima donna to sing to us in the evening? think so. She is pretty; she will assist in obscuring the deformity of Dexter. Very well; there is our party complete! I will shut myself up this evening and approach the question of dinner with my cook. Shall we say this day week," asked the Major, taking out his pocketbook, "at eight o'clock?"

I consented to the proposed compromise--but not very willingly. With a letter of introduction, I might have seen Miserrimus Dexter that afternoon. As it was, the "little dinner" compelled me to wait in absolute inaction through a whole week. However, there was no help for it but to submit. Major Fitz-David, in his polite way, could be as obstinate as I was. He had evidently made up his mind; and further opposition on my part would be of no service to me.

"Punctually at eight, Mr. Benjamin," reiterated the Major. "Put it down in your book."

Benjamin obeyed--with a side look at me, which I was at no loss to interpret. My good old friend did not relish meeting a man at dinner who was described as "half tiger, half monkey;" and the privilege of sitting next to Lady Clarinda rather daunted than delighted him. It was all my doing, and he too had no choice but to submit. "Punctually at eight, sir," said poor old Benjamin, obediently recording his formidable engagement. "Please to take another glass of wine."

The Major looked at his watch, and rose--with fluent apologies for abruptly leaving the table.

"It is later than I thought," he said. "I have an appointment with a friend--a female friend; a most attractive person. You a little remind me of her, my dear lady--you resemble her in complexion: the same creamy paleness. I adore creamy paleness. As I was saying, I have an appointment with my friend; she does me the honor to ask my opinion on some very remarkable specimens of old lace. I have studied old lace. I study everything that can make me useful or agreeable to your enchanting sex. You won't forget our little dinner? I will send Dexter his invitation the moment I get home. "He took my hand and looked at it critically, with his head a little on one side. "A delicious hand," he said; "you don't mind my looking at it--you don't mind my kissing it, do you? A delicious hand is one of my weaknesses. Forgive my weaknesses. I promise to repent and amend one of these days."

"At your age, Major, do you think you have much time to lose?" asked a strange voice, speaking behind us.

We all three looked around toward the door. There stood my husband's mother, smiling satirically, with Benjamin's shy little maid-servant waiting to announce her.

Major Fitz-David was ready with his answer.

The old soldier was not easily taken by surprise.

"Age, my dear Mrs. Macallan, is a purely relative expression," he said. "There are some people who are never young, and there are other people who are never old. I am one of the other people. Au revoir!"

With that answer the incorrigible Major kissed the tips of his fingers to us and walked out. Benjamin, bowing with his old-fashioned courtesy, threw open the door of his little library, and, inviting Mrs. Macallan and myself to pass in, left us together in the room.