

COLONEL AND MRS. CHUTNEY.

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CHAPTER V

The next evening Mrs. Chutney sat alone in the library, expecting the return of her lord to dinner, and hoping earnestly he would fulfil his intention of bringing Captain Peake with him, a trial which was almost more than her weakened nerves could bear.

Mrs. Chutney looked very pale; traces of tears dimmed her soft eyes. She had passed a most distressing day. She had been early despatched to extract the truth from Mary Holden, who had been left in derance vile with the redoubtable Aunt Barbara. But tears and caresses were as unavailing as threats. Mary seemed to harden under Miss Bousfield's taunts and reproaches. Poor Mrs. Chutney was in despair; fluctuating between her unbounded confidence in, and admiration of her cousin, and the undoubted evidence of her indiscretion—for Mary admitted that her unknown admirer proved to be Sir Frederic Samperton; a fact which, although Mrs. Chutney carefully suppressed, filled up the measure of her uneasiness. Mary herself too, though angry, and putting on a bold front, was, Mrs. Chutney could see, frightened and anxious. "If she would but open her heart to me!" thought the tearful Louisa. "It must be something very strange, or she would tell me. I trust it will all come right by Tuesday next, or I do not know how I shall manage the dinner—perhaps, indeed, the colonel will put Sir Frederic off, though he has fixed the day himself."

At this point in her cogitations a ring at the hall-door bell set her heart beating. She glanced at the clock. Ten minutes to six—it was Colonel Chutney, of course, and she shuddered in anticipation of the well-known cloud upon his brow, and the inevitable outbreak of indignation with which whatever and whoever first encountered him would be greeted. It was, therefore, a certain relief, though a great surprise, when "Mr. Adolphus Deal" was announced; especially as that gentleman presented himself in accurate evening costume—a waistcoat with jewelled buttons, elaborate shirt-front, a mere thread of a white tie, patent leather boots, and a crush hat.

He has evidently come to dine," Mrs. Chutney thought. "Some mistake. How shall I get rid of him before Colonel Chutney arrives?" She then advanced a step or two, and said interrogatively, with an air of polite surprise,

"Mr. Deal?"

"Yes," replied the exquisite upholsterer, with a smile and a bow; both marred by nervousness. "am here in obedience to your slightest wish. I have selected the earliest moment you named, and trusted to your delicate tact to manage everything—all—a—in short—all serene."

"Mad!" thought Louisa. "I am sure, Mr. Deal," she said aloud, "I am much obliged by the promptitude with which you have executed all our orders; but did you not get a note from me this morning, in which I explained that—?"

Deal foresaw something uncomfortable, and stammered hastily, "No, I received no second communication."

"I really do not understand you," said Mrs. Chutney, almost peevishly. "But after sending you that note on Monday, I found that I had unconsciously mistaken—"

"Then he does not do out-to-day?" interrupted Deal, eagerly. "But fear not, I shall vanish at your slightest wish. Perish every consideration except your happiness!"

This dramatic burst bewildered Mrs. Chutney more than ever. "You see," she returned incoherently, "I put them into wrong envelopes, and saw immediately the danger of Colonel Chutney discovering the error—in short, Mr. Deal, he is rather peculiar, and I wish you would be so good as to go away."

"I am gone," replied Adolphus, with what he intended for an air of chivalrous devotion.

"Yes, do go; you can call to-morrow, you know, about the ottoman."

"The ottoman?" Adolphus laughed satirically. "Oh! woman in this hour of ease—"

"There, pray be calm, my dear sir," cried Mrs. Chutney, now convinced of his insanity and greatly alarmed. "But oh, this is him," she continued, in despair, "that is his ring! And if he sees you, I would hardly answer for your life, or mine either."

"Put me somewhere—anywhere! Dispose of me as you will," said Deal, with an uncomfortable recollection of the stout frame and irate temperament of the coming veteran; and he turned hastily to the library door.

"No, no," whispered Mrs. Chutney, eagerly, "not there. Go into the garden. John," she continued to the page, "show Mr. Deal into the garden. Then after your master is safe in, take him the key of the lower gate. Make haste—oh! do make haste."

In the midst of his dread and timidity Adolphus dropped his hat, and made an ineffectual effort to recover it. "Do not delay, Mr. Deal—pray do not," implored Mrs. Chutney; and the next moment the French window leading to the garden closed upon the hatless upholsterer.

A second furious ring at the bell, and Mrs. Chutney, retreating hastily towards her fauteuil, tripped over the lost head-gear, picked it up, and dropped it into an obscure corner between the window and the piano, where the ample curtains effectually concealed it.

Colonel Chutney entered, seething with wrath. He wiped his brow and took a turn up and down the room, unable to find words sufficiently expressive of his indignation, while Mrs. Chutney sat trembling. In this condition violent-tempered people consider they are calm, turbulently insisting that they are so. When the words came that the colonel had been vainly seeking for, he spoke them slowly and solemnly; "Look here, Mrs. Chutney, I have been kept five minutes at that infernal door, with the sun blazing full upon me! How can a man stand these repeated insults? Insults I call them, by Jove! when a man's wishes are disregarded, and—"

"Well, never mind," said Mrs. Chutney, in a soothing tone, and nerving herself with the hope that her difficulties were nearly over. "Go up and wash your hands. There is such a nice curry for dinner."

"That is all very well," replied the husband, suspiciously, "but I would lay two to one you have forgotten the cocoa-nut."

"You have lost, then," cried his wife, attempting a playful tone. "Come—trying to snatch a kiss—I consider you owe me a pair of gloves."

The colonel, a good deal surprised, submitted awkwardly, and, slightly mollified, continued his quarter-deck walk over the carpet. "Now, Louisa," he began, "what have you done with Mary to-day?"

"Nothing, dear. I could make nothing of her. Not a single syllable of explanation could I extract from her. So I begged Aunt Barbara to bring her over to dinner."

"You have? Then you have done very wrong. I have asked Peake; and as I do not wish him to be dragged into the same miserable position I have been, I should prefer—"

here he stopped short and stared fixedly at the windows. "I say," observed the colonel, intensely, "look at those blinds; one of them is a foot higher than the other. How any right minded person with an eye in head can endure such a dreadful obliquity, is more than I can fathom." He began to untwist the cord, when he again made a sudden pause and looked out intently into the garden. "Who is that lunatic walking about without his hat? he asked at last. "Gad, it's Deal, the upholsterer. What the deuce is Deal doing there?"

"It is all over," thought the wretched Louisa, her heart sinking within her.

"John," shouted colonel Chutney to the page, "come here"—pointing to the garden. "Who is that maniac?" John appeared like magic, troubled with a bad cough, and looked to his mistress for directions. She shook her head despairingly. John's cough got worse.

"Swop that confounded hacking!" cried the colonel, sternly, "and come here. Look! Tell me who that is in the garden?"

"Please, sir," returned the page, with an air of unhesitating certainty, "that, sir? that's Miss Jemima Ann, as lives at Number Twenty—her young man. I see him often of an evening walking under her balcony, and he never do wear his 'at."

"Do you mean to tell me you do not recognise him as that ridiculous idiot, Deal, the upholsterer?"

"Well, sir," looking out carefully, and with a tone of great candour, "now I look closer, it is Mr. Deal."

"There is some infernal mischief here," cried the colonel, a dark suspicion rushing to his brain. "Why was I kept so long at the door? Why—why—Mrs. Chutney?"

"My dear Felix, believe me—"

"I will believe nothing! Go, John, go this moment, and bring me that wretched imbecile. I will get to the bottom of this, and if I find you have been compromising me with expensive orders, I will post a warning against you in all the public papers to-morrow."

The colonel paused for want of breath, the page rushed away to execute his wishes, and poor Mrs. Chutney, roused to indignation at last, stood silently watching the scene, unutterably humiliated at being placed in such a position for so insufficient a cause. The colonel threw open the window, and, regardless of public opinion, shouted out his directions and orders in stentorian tones.

Meanwhile, the wretched Adolphus, finding the garden gate locked, had lingered about in search of succour, and his hat. On first seeing John flying with the most ostentatious speed, he imagined he was coming to his aid, and hastened to meet him, till warned by an injunction from the page, in as loud a tone as he dared, "to cut 'tother way! I'm sent to catch ye alive;" whereupon Deal, his wits sharpened by a dread of Colonel Chutney's wrath, and a suspicion that (as he would himself have phrased it) he was in the "wrong box," turned sharply and dived down another walk; while, under shelter of a friendly tree, the page unlocked and left open the garden gate, then rushed towards Deal, shouting to him "to come back, as master wanted him."

The colonel stood at the half-open window in his eagerness, and Mrs. Chutney, fearing the neighbours' comments, endeavoured to drag him back. "That's right, John! dodge under the willow-tree, and you will have him! Double round the mignonette plot. Turn his flank by the garden-seat. Police! Police!"

"For heaven's sake, Colonel Chutney," said his wife, alarmed and scandalized at these outcries, "compose yourself! People will think you mad!"

By this time several smart parlour maids had assembled at both the back and front entrances, with friendly messages to enquire if the house had been robbed; if "master could be of any use;" if "missis should come and stay with Mrs. Chutney," who was popularly supposed to be in violent hysterics, after witnessing a desperate hand to hand conflict between her husband and a truculent house-breaker.

In the midst of this excitement Captain Peake presented himself, with the intention of dining according to invitation with the hospitable owners of the house.

Mrs. Chutney, now thoroughly roused to self-assertion, had surmounted a strong inclination to a fit of crying, and received Captain Peake with wonderful composure. "What is the matter?" asked that gentleman, with natural curiosity. "There's a bery of uncommon smart girls in caps on the door-steps, and they say Chutney has been obliged to cut somebody's throat in self-defence. Where is your cousin, Miss Holden?"

"Thank heaven!" returned Mrs. Chutney, "there is one sane individual in the house at last! Captain Peake, I can explain this matter in a few words, and the colonel will not hear me."

Captain Peake looked much distressed, and pulled his long moustaches meditatively, as the colonel panted on a chair, flushed and heated from unusual exertion.

"Sorry to give you so strange a reception, Peake," he said in an injured tone; "but I have partly unearthed a mystery of some kind."