

ELEVENTH SCENE.--SIR PATRICK'S HOUSE.

CHAPTER THE FORTY-SECOND. - THE SMOKING-ROOM WINDOW.

"I CAN'T believe it! I won't believe it! You're trying to part me from my husband--you're trying to set me against my dearest friend. It's infamous. It's horrible. What have I done to you? Oh, my head! my head! Are you trying to drive me mad?"

Pale and wild; her hands twisted in her hair; her feet hurrying her aimlessly to and fro in the room--so Blanche answered her step-mother, when the object of Lady Lundie's pilgrimage had been accomplished, and the cruel truth had been plainly told.

Her ladyship sat, superbly composed, looking out through the window at the placid landscape of woods and fields which surrounded Ham Farm.

"I was prepared for this outbreak," she said, sadly. "These wild words relieve your over-burdened heart, my poor child. I can wait, Blanche--I can wait!"

Blanche stopped, and confronted Lady Lundie.

"You and I never liked each other," she said. "I wrote you a pert letter from this place. I have always taken Anne's part against you. I have shown you plainly--rudely, I dare say--that I was glad to be married and get away from you. This is not your revenge, is it?"

"Oh, Blanche, Blanche, what thoughts to think! what words to say! I can only pray for you."

"I am mad, Lady Lundie. You bear with mad people. Bear with me. I have been hardly more than a fortnight married. I love him--I love her--with all my heart. Remember what you have told me about them. Remember! remember! remember!"

She reiterated the words with a low cry of pain. Her hands went up to her head again; and she returned restlessly to pacing this way and that in the room.

Lady Lundie tried the effect of a gentle remonstrance. "For your own sake," she said, "don't persist in estranging yourself from me. In this dreadful trial, I am the only friend you have."

Blanche came back to her step-mother's chair; and looked at her steadily, in silence. Lady Lundie submitted to inspection--and bore it perfectly.

"Look into my heart," she said. "Blanche! it bleeds for you!"

Blanche heard, without heeding. Her mind was painfully intent on its own thoughts. "You are a religious woman," she said, abruptly. "Will you swear on your Bible, that what you told me is true?"

"My Bible!" repeated Lady Lundie with sorrowful emphasis. "Oh, my child! have you no part in that precious inheritance? Is it not your Bible, too?"

A momentary triumph showed itself in Blanche's face. "You daren't swear it!" she said. "That's enough for me!"

She turned away scornfully. Lady Lundie caught her by the hand, and drew her sharply back. The suffering saint disappeared, and the woman who was no longer to be trifled with took her place.

"There must be an end to this," she said. "You don't believe what I have told you. Have you courage enough to put it to the test?"

Blanche started, and released her hand. She trembled a little. There was a horrible certainty of conviction expressed in Lady Lundie's sudden change of manner.

"How?" she asked.

"You shall see. Tell me the truth, on your side, first. Where is Sir Patrick? Is he really out, as his servant told me?"

"Yes. He is out with the farm bailiff. You have taken us all by surprise. You wrote that we were to expect you by the next train."

"When does the next train arrive? It is eleven o'clock now."

"Between one and two."

"Sir Patrick will not be back till then?"

"Not till then."

"Where is Mr. Brinkworth?"

"My husband?"

"Your husband--if you like. Is he out, too?"

"He is in the smoking-room."

"Do you mean the long room, built out from the back of the house?"

"Yes."

"Come down stairs at once with me."

Blanche advanced a step--and drew back. "What do you want of me?" she asked, inspired by a sudden distrust.

Lady Lundie turned round, and looked at her impatiently.

"Can't you see yet," she said, sharply, "that your interest and my interest in this matter are one? What have I told you?"

"Don't repeat it!"

"I must repeat it! I have told you that Arnold Brinkworth was privately at Craig Fernie, with Miss Silvester, in the acknowledged character of her husband--when we supposed him to be visiting the estate left him by his aunt. You refuse to believe it--and I am about to put it to the proof. Is it your interest or is it not, to know whether this man deserves the blind belief that you place in him?"

Blanche trembled from head to foot, and made no reply.

"I am going into the garden, to speak to Mr. Brinkworth through the smoking-room window," pursued her ladyship. "Have you the courage to come with me; to wait behind out of sight; and to hear what he says with his own lips? I am not afraid of putting it to that test. Are you?"

The tone in which she asked the question roused Blanche's spirit.

"If I believed him to be guilty," she said, resolutely, "I should not have the courage. I believe him to be innocent. Lead the way, Lady Lundie, as soon as you please."

They left the room--Blanche's own room at Ham Farm--and descended to the hall. Lady Lundie stopped, and consulted the railway time-table hanging near the house-door.

"There is a train to London at a quarter to twelve," she said. "How long does it take to walk to the station?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You will soon know. Answer my question."

"It's a walk of twenty minutes to the station."

Lady Lundie referred to her watch. "There will be just time," she said.

"Time for what?"

"Come into the garden."

With that answer, she led the way out

The smoking-room projected at right angles from the wall of the house, in an oblong form--with a bow-window at the farther end, looking into the garden. Before she turned the corner, and showed herself within the range of view from the window Lady Lundie looked back, and signed to Blanche to wait behind the angle of the wall. Blanche waited.

The next instant she heard the voices in conversation through the open window. Arnold's voice was the first that spoke.

"Lady Lundie! Why, we didn't expect you till luncheon time!"

Lady Lundie was ready with her answer.

"I was able to leave town earlier than I had anticipated. Don't put out your cigar; and don't move. I am not coming in."

The quick interchange of question and answer went on; every word being

audible in the perfect stillness of the place. Arnold was the next to speak.

"Have you seen Blanche?"

"Blanche is getting ready to go out with me. We mean to have a walk together. I have many things to say to her. Before we go, I have something to say to you."

"Is it any thing very serious?"

"It is most serious."

"About me?"

"About you. I know where you went on the evening of my lawn-party at Windygates--you went to Craig Fernie."

"Good Heavens! how did you find out--?"

"I know whom you went to meet--Miss Silvester. I know what is said of you and of her--you are man and wife."

"Hush! don't speak so loud. Somebody may hear you!"

"What does it matter if they do? I am the only person whom you have kept out of the secret. You all of you know it here."

"Nothing of the sort! Blanche doesn't know it."

"What! Neither you nor Sir Patrick has told Blanche of the situation you stand in at this moment?"

"Not yet. Sir Patrick leaves it to me. I haven't been able to bring myself to do it. Don't say a word, I entreat you. I don't know how Blanche may interpret it. Her friend is expected in London to-morrow. I want to wait till Sir Patrick can bring them together. Her friend will break it to her better than I can. It's my notion. Sir Patrick thinks it a good one. Stop! you're not going away already?"

"She will be here to look for me if I stay any longer."

"One word! I want to know--"

"You shall know later in the day."

Her ladyship appeared again round the angle of the wall. The next words that passed were words spoken in a whisper.

"Are you satisfied now, Blanche?"

"Have you mercy enough left, Lady Lundie, to take me away from this house?"

"My dear child! Why else did I look at the time-table in the hall?"

CHAPTER THE FORTY-THIRD. - THE EXPLOSION.

ARNOLD'S mind was far from easy when he was left by himself again in the smoking-room.

After wasting some time in vainly trying to guess at the source from which Lady Lundie had derived her information, he put on his hat, and took the direction which led to Blanche's favorite walk at Ham Farm. Without absolutely distrusting her ladyship's discretion, the idea had occurred to him that he would do well to join his wife and her step-mother. By making a third at the interview between them, he might prevent the conversation from assuming a perilously confidential turn.

The search for the ladies proved useless. They had not taken the direction in which he supposed them to have gone.

He returned to the smoking-room, and composed himself to wait for events as patiently as he might. In this passive position--with his thoughts still running on Lady Lundie--his memory reverted to a brief conversation between Sir Patrick and himself, occasioned, on the previous day, by her ladyship's announcement of her proposed visit to Ham Farm. Sir Patrick had at once expressed his conviction that his sister-in-law's journey south had some acknowledged purpose at the bottom of it.

"I am not at all sure, Arnold" (he had said), "that I have done wisely in leaving her letter unanswered. And I am strongly disposed to think that the safest course will be to take her into the secret when she comes to-morrow. We can't help the position in which we are placed. It was impossible (without admitting your wife to our confidence) to prevent Blanche from writing that unlucky letter to her--and, even if we had prevented it, she must have heard in other ways of your return to England. I don't doubt my own discretion, so far; and I don't doubt the convenience of keeping her in the dark, as a means of keeping her from meddling in this business of yours, until I have had time to set it right. But she may, by some unlucky accident, discover the truth for herself--and, in that case, I strongly distrust the influence which she might attempt to exercise on Blanche's mind."

Those were the words--and what had happened on the day after they had been spoken? Lady Lundie had discovered the truth; and she was, at that moment, alone somewhere with Blanche. Arnold took up his hat once more, and set forth on the search for the ladies in another direction.

The second expedition was as fruitless as the first. Nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard, of Lady Lundie and Blanche.

Arnold's watch told him that it was not far from the time when Sir Patrick might be expected to return. In all probability, while he had been looking for them, the ladies had gone back by some other way to the house. He entered the rooms on the ground-floor, one after another. They were all empty. He went up stairs, and knocked at the door of Blanche's room. There was no answer. He opened the door and looked in. The room was empty, like the rooms down stairs. But, close to the entrance, there was a trifling circumstance to attract notice, in the shape of a note lying on the carpet. He picked it up, and saw that it was addressed to him in the handwriting of his wife.

He opened it. The note began, without the usual form of address, in these words:

"I know the abominable secret that you and my uncle have hidden from me. I know your infamy, and her infamy, and the position in which, thanks to you and to her, I now stand. Reproaches would be wasted words, addressed to such a man as you are. I write these lines to tell you that I have placed myself under my step-mother's protection in London. It is useless to attempt to follow me. Others will find out whether the ceremony of marriage which you went through with me is binding on you or not. For myself, I know enough already. I have gone, never to come back, and never to let you see me again.--Blanche."

Hurrying headlong down the stairs with but one clear idea in his mind--the idea of instantly following his wife--Arnold encountered Sir Patrick, standing by a table in the hall, on which cards and notes left by visitors were usually placed, with an open letter in his hand. Seeing in an instant what had happened, he threw one of his arms round Arnold, and stopped him at the house-door.

"You are a man," he said, firmly. "Bear it like a man."

Arnold's head fell on the shoulder of his kind old friend. He burst into tears.

Sir Patrick let the irrepressible outbreak of grief have its way. In those first moments, silence was mercy. He said nothing. The letter which he had been reading (from Lady Lundie, it is needless to say), dropped unheeded at his feet.

Arnold lifted his head, and dashed away the tears.

"I am ashamed of myself," he said. "Let me go."

"Wrong, my poor fellow--doubly wrong!" returned Sir Patrick. "There is no shame in shedding such tears as those. And there is nothing to be done by leaving me."

"I must and will see her!"

"Read that," said Sir Patrick, pointing to the letter on the floor. "See your wife? Your wife is with the woman who has written those lines. Read them."

Arnold read them.

"DEAR SIR PATRICK,--If you had honored me with your confidence, I should have been happy to consult you before I interfered to rescue Blanche from the position in which Mr. Brinkworth has placed her. As it is, your late brother's child is under my protection at my house in London. If you attempt to exercise your authority, it must be by main force--I will submit to nothing less. If Mr. Brinkworth attempts to exercise his authority, he shall establish his right to do so (if he can) in a police-court.

"Very truly yours, JULIA LUNDIE."

Arnold's resolution was not to be shaken even by this. "What do I care," he burst out, hotly, "whether I am dragged through the streets by the police or not! I will see my wife. I will clear myself of the horrible suspicion she has about me. You have shown me your letter. Look at mine!"

Sir Patrick's clear sense saw the wild words that Blanche had written in their true light.

"Do you hold your wife responsible for that letter?" he asked. "I see her step-mother in every line of it. You descend to something unworthy of you, if you seriously defend yourself against this! You can't see it? You persist in holding to your own view? Write, then. You can't get to her--your letter may. No! When you leave this house, you leave it with me. I have conceded something on my side, in allowing you to write. I insist on your conceding something, on your side, in return. Come into the library! I answer for

setting things right between you and Blanche, if you will place your interests in my hands. Do you trust me or not?"

Arnold yielded. They went into the library together. Sir Patrick pointed to the writing-table. "Relieve your mind there," he said. "And let me find you a reasonable man again when I come back."

When he returned to the library the letter was written; and Arnold's mind was so far relieved--for the time at least.

"I shall take your letter to Blanche myself," said Sir Patrick, "by the train that leaves for London in half an hour's time."

"You will let me go with you?"

"Not to-day. I shall be back this evening to dinner. You shall hear all that has happened; and you shall accompany me to London to-morrow--if I find it necessary to make any lengthened stay there. Between this and then, after the shock that you have suffered, you will do well to be quiet here. Be satisfied with my assurance that Blanche shall have your letter. I will force my authority on her step-mother to that extent (if her step-mother resists) without scruple. The respect in which I hold the sex only lasts as long as the sex deserves it--and does not extend to Lady Lundie. There is no advantage that a man can take of a woman which I am not fully prepared to take of my sister-in-law."

With that characteristic farewell, he shook hands with Arnold, and departed for the station.

At seven o'clock the dinner was on the table. At seven o'clock Sir Patrick came down stairs to eat it, as perfectly dressed as usual, and as composed as if nothing had happened.

"She has got your letter," he whispered, as he took Arnold's arm, and led him into the dining-room.

"Did she say any thing?"

"Not a word."

"How did she look?"

"As she ought to look--sorry for what she has done."

The dinner began. As a matter of necessity, the subject of Sir Patrick's expedition was dropped while the servants were in the room--to be regularly taken up again by Arnold in the intervals between the courses. He began when the soup was taken away.

"I confess I had hoped to see Blanche come back with you!" he said, sadly enough.

"In other words," returned Sir Patrick, "you forgot the native obstinacy of the sex. Blanche is beginning to feel that she has been wrong. What is the necessary consequence? She naturally persists in being wrong. Let her alone, and leave your letter to have its effect. The serious difficulties in our way don't rest with Blanche. Content yourself with knowing that."

The fish came in, and Arnold was silenced--until his next opportunity came with the next interval in the course of the dinner.

"What are the difficulties?" he asked

"The difficulties are my difficulties and yours," answered Sir Patrick. "My difficulty is, that I can't assert my authority, as guardian, if I assume my niece (as I do) to be a married woman. Your difficulty is, that you can't assert your authority as her husband, until it is distinctly proved that you and Miss Silvester are not man and wife. Lady Lundie was perfectly aware that she would place us in that position, when she removed Blanche from this house. She has cross-examined Mrs. Inchbare; she has written to your steward for the date of your arrival at your estate; she has done every thing, calculated every thing, and foreseen every thing--except my excellent temper. The one mistake she has made, is in thinking she could get the better of that. No, my dear boy! My trump card is my temper. I keep it in my hand, Arnold--I keep it in my hand!"

The next course came in--and there was an end of the subject again. Sir Patrick enjoyed his mutton, and entered on a long and interesting narrative of the history of some rare white Burgundy on the table imported by himself. Arnold resolutely resumed the discussion with the departure of the mutton.

"It seems to be a dead lock," he said.

"No slang!" retorted Sir Patrick.

"For Heaven's sake, Sir, consider my anxiety, and tell me what you propose to do!"

"I propose to take you to London with me to-morrow, on this condition--that you promise me, on your word of honor, not to attempt to see your wife before Saturday next."

"I shall see her then?"

"If you give me your promise."

"I do! I do!"

The next course came in. Sir Patrick entered on the question of the merits of the partridge, viewed as an eatable bird, "By himself, Arnold--plainly roasted, and tested on his own merits--an overrated bird. Being too fond of shooting him in this country, we become too fond of eating him next. Properly understood, he is a vehicle for sauce and truffles--nothing more. Or no--that is hardly doing him justice. I am bound to add that he is honorably associated with the famous French receipt for cooking an olive. Do you know it?"

There was an end of the bird; there was an end of the jelly. Arnold got his next chance--and took it.

"What is to be done in London to-morrow?" he asked.

"To-morrow," answered Sir Patrick, "is a memorable day in our calendar. To-morrow is Tuesday--the day on which I am to see Miss Silvester."

Arnold set down the glass of wine which he was just raising to his lips.

"After what has happened," he said, "I can hardly bear to hear her name mentioned. Miss Silvester has parted me from my wife."

"Miss Silvester may atone for that, Arnold, by uniting you again."

"She has been the ruin of me so far."

"She may be the salvation of you yet."

The cheese came in; and Sir Patrick returned to the Art of Cookery.

"Do you know the receipt for cooking an olive, Arnold?"

"No."

"What does the new generation know? It knows how to row, how to shoot, how to play at cricket, and how to bat. When it has lost its muscle and lost its money--that is to say, when it has grown old--what a generation it will be! It doesn't matter: I sha'n't live to see it. Are you listening, Arnold?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How to cook an olive! Put an olive into a lark, put a lark into a quail; put a quail into a plover; put a plover into a partridge; put a partridge into a pheasant; put a pheasant into a turkey. Good. First, partially roast, then carefully stew--until all is thoroughly done down to the olive. Good again. Next, open the window. Throw out the turkey, the pheasant, the partridge, the plover, the quail, and the lark. Then, eat the olive. The dish is expensive, but (we have it on the highest authority) well worth the sacrifice. The quintessence of the flavor of six birds, concentrated in one olive. Grand idea! Try another glass of the white Burgundy, Arnold."

At last the servants left them--with the wine and dessert on the table.

"I have borne it as long as I can, Sir," said Arnold. "Add to all your kindness to me by telling me at once what happened at Lady Lundie's."

It was a chilly evening. A bright wood fire was burning in the room. Sir Patrick drew his chair to the fire.

"This is exactly what happened," he said. "I found company at Lady Lundie's, to begin with. Two perfect strangers to me. Captain Newenden, and his niece, Mrs. Glenarm. Lady Lundie offered to see me in another room; the two strangers offered to withdraw. I declined both proposals. First check to her ladyship! She has reckoned throughout, Arnold, on our being afraid to face public opinion. I showed her at starting that we were as ready to face it as she was. 'I always accept what the French call accomplished facts,' I said. 'You have brought matters to a crisis, Lady Lundie. So let it be. I have a word to say to my niece (in your presence, if you like); and I have another word to say to you afterward--without presuming to disturb your guests.' The guests sat down again (both naturally devoured by curiosity). Could her ladyship decently refuse me an interview with my own niece, while two witnesses were looking on? Impossible. I saw Blanche (Lady

Lundie being present, it is needless to say) in the back drawing-room. I gave her your letter; I said a good word for you; I saw that she was sorry, though she wouldn't own it--and that was enough. We went back into the front drawing-room. I had not spoken five words on our side of the question before it appeared, to my astonishment and delight, that Captain Newenden was in the house on the very question that had brought me into the house--the question of you and Miss Silvester. My business, in the interests of my niece, was to deny your marriage to the lady. His business, in the interests of his niece, was to assert your marriage to the lady. To the unutterable disgust of the two women, we joined issue, in the most friendly manner, on the spot. 'Charmed to have the pleasure of meeting you, Captain Newenden.'--'Delighted to have the honor of making your acquaintance, Sir Patrick.'--'I think we can settle this in two minutes?'--'My own idea perfectly expressed.'--'State your position, Captain.'--'With the greatest pleasure. Here is my niece, Mrs. Glenarm, engaged to marry Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn. All very well, but there happens to be an obstacle--in the shape of a lady. Do I put it plainly?'--'You put it admirably, Captain; but for the loss to the British navy, you ought to have been a lawyer. Pray, go on.'--'You are too good, Sir Patrick. I resume. Mr. Delamayn asserts that this person in the back-ground has no claim on him, and backs his assertion by declaring that she is married already to Mr. Arnold Brinkworth. Lady Lundie and my niece assure me, on evidence which satisfies them, that the assertion is true. The evidence does not satisfy me. 'I hope, Sir Patrick, I don't strike you as being an excessively obstinate man?'--'My dear Sir, you impress me with the highest opinion of your capacity for sifting human testimony! May I ask, next, what course you mean to take?'--'The very thing I was going to mention, Sir Patrick! This is my course. I refuse to sanction my niece's engagement to Mr. Delamayn, until Mr. Delamayn has actually proved his statement by appeal to witnesses of the lady's marriage. He refers me to two witnesses; but declines acting at once in the matter for himself, on the ground that he is in training for a foot-race. I admit that that is an obstacle, and consent to arrange for bringing the two witnesses to London myself. By this post I have written to my lawyers in Perth to look the witnesses up; to offer them the necessary terms (at Mr. Delamayn's expense) for the use of their time; and to produce them by the end of the week. The footrace is on Thursday next. Mr. Delamayn will be able to attend after that, and establish his own assertion by his own witnesses. What do you say, Sir Patrick, to Saturday next (with Lady Lundie's permission) in this room?'--There is the substance of the captain's statement. He is as old as I am and is dressed to look like thirty; but a very pleasant fellow for all that. I struck my sister-in-law dumb by accepting the proposal without a moment's hesitation. Mrs. Glenarm and Lady Lundie looked at each other in mute amazement. Here was a difference about which two women would have mortally quarreled;

and here were two men settling it in the friendliest possible manner. I wish you had seen Lady Lundie's face, when I declared myself deeply indebted to Captain Newenden for rendering any prolonged interview with her ladyship quite unnecessary. 'Thanks to the captain,' I said to her, in the most cordial manner, 'we have absolutely nothing to discuss. I shall catch the next train, and set Arnold Brinkworth's mind quite at ease.' To come back to serious things, I have engaged to produce you, in the presence of every body--your wife included--on Saturday next. I put a bold face on it before the others. But I am bound to tell you that it is by no means easy to say--situated as we are now--what the result of Saturday's inquiry will be. Every thing depends on the issue of my interview with Miss Silvester to-morrow. It is no exaggeration to say, Arnold, that your fate is in her hands."

"I wish to heaven I had never set eyes on her!" said Arnold.

"Lay the saddle on the right horse," returned Sir Patrick. "Wish you had never set eyes on Geoffrey Delamayn."

Arnold hung his head. Sir Patrick's sharp tongue had got the better of him once more.