

**FIFTEENTH SCENE.--HOLCHESTER HOUSE.**

**CHAPTER THE FORTY-SEVENTH. - THE LAST CHANCE.**

"HIS lordship is dangerously ill, Sir. Her ladyship can receive no visitors."

"Be so good as to take that card to Lady Holchester. It is absolutely necessary that your mistress should be made acquainted--in the interests of her younger son--with something which I can only mention to her ladyship herself."

The two persons speaking were Lord Holchester's head servant and Sir Patrick Lundie. At that time barely half an hour had passed since the close of the proceedings at Portland Place.

The servant still hesitated with the card in his hand. "I shall forfeit my situation," he said, "if I do it."

"You will most assuredly forfeit your situation if you don't do it," returned Sir Patrick. "I warn you plainly, this is too serious a matter to be trifled with."

The tone in which those words were spoken had its effect. The man went up stairs with his message.

Sir Patrick waited in the hall. Even the momentary delay of entering one of the reception-rooms was more than he could endure at that moment. Anne's happiness was hopelessly sacrificed already. The preservation of her personal safety--which Sir Patrick firmly believed to be in danger--was the one service which it was possible to render to her now. The perilous position in which she stood toward her husband--as an immovable obstacle, while she lived, between Geoffrey and Mrs. Glenarm--was beyond the reach of remedy. But it was still possible to prevent her from becoming the innocent cause of Geoffrey's pecuniary ruin, by standing in the way of a reconciliation between father and son.

Resolute to leave no means untried of serving Anne's interests, Sir Patrick had allowed Arnold and Blanche to go to his own residence in London, alone, and had not even waited to say a farewell word to any of the persons who had taken part in the inquiry. "Her life may depend on what I can do for her at Holchester House!" With that conviction in him, he had left Portland

Place. With that conviction in him, he had sent his message to Lady Holchester, and was now waiting for the reply.

The servant appeared again on the stairs. Sir Patrick went up to meet him.

"Her ladyship will see you, Sir, for a few minutes."

The door of an upper room was opened; and Sir Patrick found himself in the presence of Geoffrey's mother. There was only time to observe that she possessed the remains of rare personal beauty, and that she received her visitor with a grace and courtesy which implied (under the circumstances) a considerate regard for his position at the expense of her own.

"You have something to say to me, Sir Patrick, on the subject of my second son. I am in great affliction. If you bring me bad news, I will do my best to bear it. May I trust to your kindness not to keep me in suspense?"

"It will help me to make my intrusion as little painful as possible to your ladyship," replied Sir Patrick, "if I am permitted to ask a question. Have you heard of any obstacle to the contemplated marriage of Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn and Mrs. Glenarm?"

Even that distant reference to Anne produced an ominous change for the worse in Lady Holchester's manner.

"I have heard of the obstacle to which you allude," she said. "Mrs. Glenarm is an intimate friend of mine. She has informed me that a person named Silvester, an impudent adventuress--"

"I beg your ladyship's pardon. You are doing a cruel wrong to the noblest woman I have ever met with."

"I can not undertake, Sir Patrick, to enter into your reasons for admiring her. Her conduct toward my son has, I repeat, been the conduct of an impudent adventuress."

Those words showed Sir Patrick the utter hopelessness of shaking her prejudice against Anne. He decided on proceeding at once to the disclosure of the truth.

"I entreat you so say no more," he answered. "Your ladyship is speaking of your son's wife."

"My son has married Miss Silvester?"

"Yes."

She turned deadly pale. It appeared, for an instant, as if the shock had completely overwhelmed her. But the mother's weakness was only momentary. The virtuous indignation of the great lady had taken its place before Sir Patrick could speak again. She rose to terminate the interview.

"I presume," she said, "that your errand here is as an end."

Sir Patrick rose, on his side, resolute to do the duty which had brought him to the house.

"I am compelled to trespass on your ladyship's attention for a few minutes more," he answered. "The circumstances attending the marriage of Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn are of no common importance. I beg permission (in the interests of his family) to state, very briefly, what they are."

In a few clear sentences he narrated what had happened, that afternoon, in Portland Place. Lady Holchester listened with the steadiest and coldest attention. So far as outward appearances were concerned, no impression was produced upon her.

"Do you expect me," she asked, "to espouse the interests of a person who has prevented my son from marrying the lady of his choice, and of mine?"

"Mr. Geoffrey Delamayn, unhappily, has that reason for resenting his wife's innocent interference with interests of considerable importance to him," returned Sir Patrick. "I request your ladyship to consider whether it is desirable--in view of your son's conduct in the future--to allow his wife to stand in the doubly perilous relation toward him of being also a cause of estrangement between his father and himself."

He had put it with scrupulous caution. But Lady Holchester understood what he had refrained from saying as well as what he had actually said. She had hitherto remained standing--she now sat down again. There was a visible impression produced on her at last.

"In Lord Holchester's critical state of health," she answered, "I decline to take the responsibility of telling him what you have just told me. My own influence has been uniformly exerted in my son's favor--as long as my interference could be productive of any good result. The time for my

interference has passed. Lord Holchester has altered his will this morning. I was not present; and I have not yet been informed of what has been done. Even if I knew--"

"Your ladyship would naturally decline," said Sir Patrick, "to communicate the information to a stranger."

"Certainly. At the same time, after what you have said, I do not feel justified in deciding on this matter entirely by myself. One of Lord Holchester's executors is now in the house. There can be no impropriety in your seeing him--if you wish it. You are at liberty to say, from me, that I leave it entirely to his discretion to decide what ought to be done."

"I gladly accept your ladyship's proposal."

Lady Holchester rang the bell at her side.

"Take Sir Patrick Lundie to Mr. Marchwood," she said to the servant.

Sir Patrick started. The name was familiar to him, as the name of a friend.

"Mr. Marchwood of Hurlbeck?" he asked.

"The same."

With that brief answer, Lady Holchester dismissed her visitor. Following the servant to the other end of the corridor, Sir Patrick was conducted into a small room--the ante-chamber to the bedroom in which Lord Holchester lay. The door of communication was closed. A gentleman sat writing at a table near the window. He rose, and held out his hand, with a look of surprise, when the servant announced Sir Patrick's name. This was Mr. Marchwood.

After the first explanations had been given, Sir Patrick patiently reverted to the object of his visit to Holchester House. On the first occasion when he mentioned Anne's name he observed that Mr. Marchwood became, from that moment, specially interested in what he was saying.

"Do you happen to be acquainted with the lady?" he asked

"I only know her as the cause of a very strange proceeding, this morning, in that room." He pointed to Lord Holchester's bedroom as he spoke.

"Are you at liberty to mention what the proceeding was?"

"Hardly--even to an old friend like you--unless I felt it a matter of duty, on my part, to state the circumstances. Pray go on with what you were saying to me. You were on the point of telling me what brought you to this house."

Without a word more of preface, Sir Patrick told him the news of Geoffrey's marriage to Anne.

"Married!" cried Mr. Marchwood. "Are you sure of what you say?"

"I am one of the witnesses of the marriage."

"Good Heavens! And Lord Holchester's lawyer has left the house!"

"Can I replace him? Have I, by any chance justified you in telling me what happened this morning in the next room?"

"Justified me? You have left me no other alternative. The doctors are all agreed in dreading apoplexy--his lordship may die at any moment. In the lawyer's absence, I must take it on myself. Here are the facts. There is the codicil to Lord Holchester's Will which is still unsigned."

"Relating to his second son?"

"Relating to Geoffrey Delamayn, and giving him (when it is once executed) a liberal provision for life."

"What is the object in the way of his executing it?"

"The lady whom you have just mentioned to me."

"Anne Silvester!"

"Anne Silvester--now (as you tell me) Mrs. Geoffrey Delamayn. I can only explain the thing very imperfectly. There are certain painful circumstances associated in his lordship's memory with this lady, or with some member of her family. We can only gather that he did something--in the early part of his professional career--which was strictly within the limits of his duty, but which apparently led to very sad results. Some days since he unfortunately heard (either through Mrs. Glenarm or through Mrs. Julius Delamayn) of Miss Silvester's appearance at Swanhaven Lodge. No remark on the subject escaped him at the time. It was only this morning, when the codicil giving the legacy to Geoffrey was waiting to be executed, that his real feeling in the

matter came out. To our astonishment, he refused to sign it. 'Find Anne Silvester' (was the only answer we could get from him); 'and bring her to my bedside. You all say my son is guiltless of injuring her. I am lying on my death-bed. I have serious reasons of my own--I owe it to the memory of the dead--to assure myself of the truth. If Anne Silvester herself acquits him of having wronged her, I will provide for Geoffrey. Not otherwise.' We went the length of reminding him that he might die before Miss Silvester could be found. Our interference had but one result. He desired the lawyer to add a second codicil to the Will--which he executed on the spot. It directs his executors to inquire into the relations that have actually existed between Anne Silvester and his younger son. If we find reason to conclude that Geoffrey has gravely wronged her, we are directed to pay her a legacy--provided that she is a single woman at the time."

"And her marriage violates the provision!" exclaimed Sir Patrick.

"Yes. The codicil actually executed is now worthless. And the other codicil remains unsigned until the lawyer can produce Miss Silvester. He has left the house to apply to Geoffrey at Fulham, as the only means at our disposal of finding the lady. Some hours have passed--and he has not yet returned."

"It is useless to wait for him," said Sir Patrick. "While the lawyer was on his way to Fulham, Lord Holchester's son was on his way to Portland Place. This is even more serious than you suppose. Tell me, what under less pressing circumstances I should have no right to ask. Apart from the unexecuted codicil what is Geoffrey Delamayn's position in the will?"

"He is not even mentioned in it."

"Have you got the will?"

Mr. Marchwood unlocked a drawer, and took it out.

Sir Patrick instantly rose from his chair. "No waiting for the lawyer!" he repeated, vehemently. "This is a matter of life and death. Lady Holchester bitterly resents her son's marriage. She speaks and feels as a friend of Mrs. Glenarm. Do you think Lord Holchester would take the same view if he knew of it?"

"It depends entirely on the circumstances."

"Suppose I informed him--as I inform you in confidence--that his son has gravely wronged Miss Silvester? And suppose I followed that up by telling

him that his son has made atonement by marrying her?"

"After the feeling that he has shown in the matter, I believe he would sign the codicil."

"Then, for God's sake, let me see him!"

"I must speak to the doctor."

"Do it instantly!"

With the will in his hand, Mr. Marchwood advanced to the bedroom door. It was opened from within before he could get to it. The doctor appeared on the threshold. He held up his hand warningly when Mr. Marchwood attempted to speak to him.

"Go to Lady Holchester," he said. "It's all over."

"Dead?"

"Dead."