

FOURTH SCENE - Muswell Hill.

The next day Turlington drove to the suburbs, on the chance of finding the Graybrookes at home again. Sir Joseph disliked London, and could not prevail on himself to live any nearer to the metropolis than Muswell Hill. When Natalie wanted a change, and languished for balls, theaters, flower-shows, and the like, she had a room especially reserved for her in the house of Sir Joseph's married sister, Mrs. Sancroft, living in that central deep of the fashionable whirlpool known among mortals as Berkeley Square.

On his way through the streets, Turlington encountered a plain proof that the Graybrookes must have returned. He was passed by Launce, driving, in company with a gentleman, in a cab. The gentleman was Launce's brother, and the two were on their way to the Commissioners of Police to make the necessary arrangements for instituting an inquiry into Turlington's early life.

Arrived at the gate of the villa, the information received only partially fulfilled the visitor's expectations. The family had returned on the previous evening. Sir Joseph and his sister were at home, but Natalie was away again already. She had driven into town to lunch with her aunt. Turlington went into the house.

"Have you lost any money?" Those were the first words uttered by Sir Joseph when he and Richard met again, after the parting on board the yacht.

"Not a farthing. I might have lost seriously, if I had not got back in time to set things straight. Stupidity on the part of my people left in charge--nothing more. It's all right now."

Sir Joseph lifted his eyes, with heartfelt devotion, to the ceiling. "Thank God, Richard!" he said, in tones of the deepest feeling. He rang the bell. "Tell Miss Graybrooke Mr. Turlington is here." He turned again to Richard. "Lavinia is like me--Lavinia has been so anxious about you. We have both of us passed a sleepless night." Miss Lavinia came in. Sir Joseph hurried to meet her, and took her affectionately by both hands. "My dear! the best of all good news, Richard has not lost a farthing." Miss Lavinia lifted her eyes to the ceiling with heartfelt devotion, and said, "Thank God, Richard!"--like the echo of her brother's voice; a little late, perhaps, for its reputation as an echo, but accurate to half a note in its perfect repetition of sound.

Turlington asked the question which it had been his one object to put in

paying his visit to Muswell Hill.

"Have you spoken to Natalie?"

"This morning," replied Sir Joseph. "An opportunity offered itself after breakfast. I took advantage of it, Richard--you shall hear how."

He settled himself in his chair for one of his interminable stories; he began his opening sentence--and stopped, struck dumb at the first word. There was an unexpected obstacle in the way--his sister was not attending to him; his sister had silenced him at starting. The story touching, this time, on the question of marriage, Miss Lavinia had her woman's interest in seeing full justice done to the subject. She seized on her brother's narrative as on property in her own right.

"Joseph should have told you," she began, addressing herself to Turlington, "that our dear girl was unusually depressed in spirits this morning. Quite in the right frame of mind for a little serious talk about her future life. She ate nothing at breakfast, poor child, but a morsel of dry toast."

"And marmalade," said Sir Joseph, striking in at the first opportunity. The story, on this occasion, being Miss Lavinia's story, the polite contradictions necessary to its successful progress were naturally transferred from the sister to the brother, and became contradictions on Sir Joseph's side.

"No," said Miss Lavinia, gently, "if you will have it, Joseph--jam."

"I beg your pardon," persisted Sir Joseph; "marmalade."

"What does it matter, brother?"

"Sister! the late great and good Doctor Johnson said accuracy ought always to be studied even in the most trifling things."

"You will have your way, Joseph--"(this was the formula--answering to Sir Joseph's 'Let us waive the point'--which Miss Lavinia used, as a means of conciliating her brother, and getting a fresh start for her story). "Well, we took dear Natalie out between us, after breakfast, for a little walk in the grounds. My brother opened the subject with infinite delicacy and tact. 'Circumstances,' he said, 'into which it was not then necessary to enter, made it very desirable, young as she was, to begin to think of her establishment in life.' And then he referred, Richard (so nicely), to your faithful and devoted attachment--"

"Excuse me, Lavinia. I began with Richard's attachment, and then I got on to her establishment in life."

"Excuse me, Joseph. You managed it much more delicately than you suppose. You didn't drag Richard in by the head and shoulders in that way."

"Lavinia! I began with Richard."

"Joseph! your memory deceives you."

Turlington's impatience broke through all restraint.

"How did it end?" he asked. "Did you propose to her that we should be married in the first week of the New Year?"

"Yes!" said Miss Lavinia.

"No!" said Sir Joseph.

The sister looked at the brother with an expression of affectionate surprise. The brother looked at the sister with a fund of amiable contradiction, expressed in a low bow.

"Do you really mean to deny, Joseph, that you told Natalie we had decided on the first week in the New Year?"

"I deny the New Year, Lavinia. I said early in January."

"You will have your way, Joseph! We were walking in the shrubbery at the time. I had our dear girl's arm in mine, and I felt it tremble. She suddenly stopped. 'Oh,' she said, 'not so soon!' I said, 'My dear, consider Richard!' She turned to her father. She said, 'Don't, pray don't press it so soon, papa! I respect Richard; I like Richard as your true and faithful friend; but I don't love him as I ought to love him if I am to be his wife.' Imagine her talking in that way! What could she possibly know about it? Of course we both laughed--"

"you laughed, Lavinia."

"you laughed, Joseph."

"Get on, for God's sake!" cried Turlington, striking his hand passionately on

the table by which he was sitting. "Don't madden me by contradicting each other! Did she give way or not?"

Miss Lavinia turned to her brother. "Contradicting each other, Joseph!" she exclaimed, lifting her hands in blank amazement.

"Contradicting each other!" repeated Sir Joseph, equally astonished on his side. "My dear Richard, what can you be thinking of? I contradict my sister! We never disagreed in our lives."

"I contradict my brother! We have never had a cross word between us from the time when we were children."

Turlington internally cursed his own irritable temper.

"I beg your pardon--both of you," he said. "I didn't know what I was saying. Make some allowance for me. All my hopes in life are centered in Natalie; and you have just told me (in her own words, Miss Lavinia) that she doesn't love. You don't mean any harm, I dare say; but you cut me to the heart."

This confession, and the look that accompanied it, touched the ready sympathies of the two old people in the right place. The remainder of the story dropped between them by common consent. They vied with each other in saying the comforting words which would allay their dear Richard's anxiety. How little he knew of young girls. How could he be so foolish, poor fellow! as to attach any serious importance to what Natalie had said? As if a young creature in her teens knew the state of her own heart! Protestations and entreaties were matters of course, in such cases. Tears even might be confidently expected from a right-minded girl. It had all ended exactly as Richard would have wished it to end. Sir Joseph had said, "My child! this is a matter of experience; love will come when you are married." And Miss Lavinia had added, "Dear Natalie, if you remembered your poor mother as I remember her, you would know that your father's experience is to be relied on." In that way they had put it to her; and she had hung her head and had given--all that maiden modesty could be expected to give--a silent consent. "The wedding-day was fixed for the first week in the New Year." ("No, Joseph; not January--the New Year.") "And God bless you, Richard! and may your married life be a long and happy one."

So the average ignorance of human nature, and the average belief in conventional sentiment, complacently contemplated the sacrifice of one more victim on the all-devouring altar of Marriage! So Sir Joseph and his sister provided Launcelot Linzie with the one argument which he wanted to

convince Natalie: "Choose between making the misery of your life by marrying him, and making the happiness of your life by marrying me."

"When shall I see her?" asked Turlington, with Miss Lavinia (in tears which did her credit) in possession of one of his hands, and Sir Joseph (in tears which did him credit) in possession of the other.

"She will be back to dinner, dear Richard. Stay and dine."

"Thank you. I must go into the City first. I will come back and dine."

With that arrangement in prospect, he left them.

An hour later a telegram arrived from Natalie. She had consented to dine, as well as lunch, in Berkeley Square--sleeping there that night, and returning the next morning. Her father instantly telegraphed back by the messenger, insisting on Natalie's return to Muswell Hill that evening, in time to meet Richard Turlington at dinner.

"Quite right. Joseph," said Miss Lavinia, looking over her brother's shoulder, while he wrote the telegram.

"She is showing a disposition to coquet with Richard," rejoined Sir Joseph, with the air of a man who knew female human nature in its remotest corners. "My telegram, Lavinia, will have its effect."

Sir Joseph was quite right. His telegram had its effect. It not only brought his daughter back to dinner--it produced another result which his prophetic faculty had altogether failed to foresee.

The message reached Berkeley Square at five o'clock in the afternoon. Let us follow the message.