

FIFTH SCENE - The Square.

Between four and five in the afternoon--when the women of the Western regions are in their carriages, and the men are at their clubs--London presents few places more conveniently adapted for purposes of private talk than the solitary garden inclosure of a square.

On the day when Richard Turlington paid his visit to Muswell Hill, two ladies (with a secret between them) unlocked the gate of the railed garden in Berkeley Square. They shut the gate after entering the inclosure, but carefully forbore to lock it as well, and carefully restricted their walk to the westward side of the garden. One of them was Natalie Graybrooke. The other was Mrs. Sancroft's eldest daughter. A certain temporary interest attached, in the estimation of society, to this young lady. She had sold well in the marriage market. In other words, she had recently been raised to the position of Lord Winwood's second wife; his lordship conferring on the bride not only the honors of the peerage, but the additional distinction of being stepmother to his three single daughters, all older than herself. In person, Lady Winwood was little and fair. In character, she was dashing and resolute--a complete contrast to Natalie, and (on that very account) Natalie's bosom friend.

"My dear, one ambitious marriage in the family is quite enough! I have made up my mind that you shall marry the man you love. Don't tell me your courage is failing you--the excuse is contemptible; I decline to receive it. Natalie! the men have a phrase which exactly describes your character. You want back-bone!"

The bonnet of the lady who expressed herself in these peremptory terms barely reached the height of Natalie's shoulder. Natalie might have blown the little airy, light-haired, unsubstantial creature over the railings of the garden if she had taken a good long breath and stooped low enough. But who ever met with a tall woman who had a will of her own? Natalie's languid brown eyes looked softly down in submissive attention from an elevation of five feet seven. Lady Winwood's brisk blue eyes looked brightly up in despotic command from an elevation of four feet eleven (in her shoes).

"You are trifling with Mr. Linzie, my dear. Mr. Linzie is a nice fellow. I like him. I won't have that."

"Louisa!"

"Mr. Turlington has nothing to recommend him. He is not a well-bred old gentleman of exalted rank. He is only an odious brute who happens to have made money. You shall not marry Mr. Turlington. And you shall marry Launcelot Linzie."

"Will you let me speak, Louisa?"

"I will let you answer--nothing more. Didn't you come crying to me this morning? Didn't you say, 'Louisa, they have pronounced sentence on me! I am to be married in the first week of the New Year. Help me out of it, for Heaven's sake!' You said all that, and more. And what did I do when I heard your story?"

"Oh, you were so kind--"

"Kind doesn't half express it. I have committed crimes on your account. I have deceived my husband and my mother. For your sake I got mamma to ask Mr. Linzie to lunch (as my friend!). For your sake I have banished my unoffending husband, not an hour since, to his club. You wretched girl, who arranged a private conference in the library? Who sent Mr. Linzie off to consult his friend in the Temple on the law of clandestine marriage? Who suggested your telegraphing home, and stopping here for the night? Who made an appointment to meet your young man privately in this detestable place in ten minutes' time? I did! I did! I did! All in your interests. All to prevent you from doing what I have done--marrying to please your family instead of to please yourself. (I don't complain, mind, of Lord Winwood, or of his daughters. He is charming; his daughters I shall tame in course of time. You are different. And Mr. Turlington, as I observed before, is a brute.) Very well. Now what do you owe me on your side? You owe it to me at least to know your own mind. You don't know it. You coolly inform me that you daren't run the risk after all, and that you can't face the consequences on second thoughts. I'll tell you what! You don't deserve that nice fellow, who worships the very ground you tread on. You are a bread-and-butter miss. I don't believe you are fond of him!"

"Not fond of him!" Natalie stopped, and clasped her hands in despair of finding language strong enough for the occasion. At the same moment the sound of a closing gate caught her ear. She looked round. Launce had kept his appointment before his time. Launce was in the garden, rapidly approaching them.

"Now for the Law of Clandestine Marriage!" said Lady Winwood. "Mr. Linzie,

we will take it sitting." She led the way to one of the benches in the garden, and placed Launce between Natalie and herself. "Well, Chief Conspirator, have you got the License? No? Does it cost too much? Can I lend you the money?"

"It costs perjury, Lady Winwood, in my case," said Launce. "Natalie is not of age. I can only get a License by taking my oath that I marry her with her father's consent." He turned piteously to Natalie. "I couldn't very well do that," he said, in the tone of a man who feels bound to make an apology, "could I?" Natalie shuddered; Lady Winwood shrugged her shoulders.

"In your place a woman wouldn't have hesitated," her ladyship remarked. "But men are so selfish. Well! I suppose there is some other way?"

"Yes, there is another way," said Launce. "But there is a horrid condition attached to it--"

"Something worse than perjury, Mr. Linzie? Murder?"

"I'll tell you directly, Lady Winwood. The marriage comes first. The condition follows. There is only one chance for us. We must be married by banns."

"Banns!" cried Natalie. "Why, banns are publicly proclaimed in church!"

"They needn't be proclaimed in your church, you goose," said Lady Winwood. "And, even if they were, nobody would be the wiser. You may trust implicitly, my dear, in the elocution of an English clergyman!"

"That's just what my friend said," cried Launce. "'Take a lodging near a large parish church, in a remote part of London'--(this is my friend's advice)--'go to the clerk, tell him you want to be married by banns, and say you belong to that parish. As for the lady, in your place I should simplify it. I should say she belonged to the parish too. Give an address, and have some one there to answer questions. How is the clerk to know? He isn't likely to be over-anxious about it--his fee is eighteen-pence. The clerk makes his profit out of you, after you are married. The same rule applies to the parson. He will have your names supplied to him on a strip of paper, with dozens of other names; and he will read them out all together in one inarticulate jumble in church. You will stand at the altar when your time comes, with Brown and Jones, Nokes and Styles, Jack and Gill. All that you will have to do is, to take care that your young lady doesn't fall to Jack, and you to Gill, by mistake--and there you are, married by banns.' My friend's opinion, stated in his own words."

Natalie sighed, and wrung her hands in her lap. "We shall never get through it," she said, despondingly.

Lady Winwood took a more cheerful view.

"I see nothing very formidable as yet, my dear. But we have still to hear the end of it. You mentioned a condition just now, Mr. Linzie.

"I am coming to the condition, Lady Winwood. You naturally suppose, as I did, that I put Natalie into a cab, and run away with her from the church door?"

"Certainly. And I throw an old shoe after you for luck, and go home again."

Launce shook his head ominously.

"Natalie must go home again as well as you!"

Lady Winwood started. "Is that the condition you mentioned just now?" she asked.

"That is the condition. I may marry her without anything serious coming of it. But, if I run away with her afterward, and if you are there, aiding and abetting me, we are guilty of Abduction, and we may stand, side by side, at the bar of the Old Bailey to answer for it!"

Natalie sprang to her feet in horror. Lady Winwood held up one finger warningly, signing to her to let Launce go on.

"Natalie is not yet sixteen years old," Launce proceeded. "She must go straight back to her father's house from the church, and I must wait to run away with her till her next birthday. When she's turned sixteen, she's ripe for elopement--not an hour before. There is the law of Abduction! Despotism in a free country--that's what I call it!"

Natalie sat down again, with an air of relief.

"It's a very comforting law, I think," she said. "It doesn't force one to take the dreadful step of running away from home all at once. It gives one time to consider, and plan, and make up one's mind. I can tell you this, Launce, if I am to be persuaded into marrying you, the law of Abduction is the only thing that will induce me to do it. You ought to thank the law, instead of

abusing it."

Launce listened--without conviction.

"It's a pleasant prospect," he said, "to part at the church door, and to treat my own wife on the footing of a young lady who is engaged to marry another gentleman."

"Is it any pleasanter for me," retorted Natalie, "to have Richard Turlington courting me, when I am all the time your wife? I shall never be able to do it. I wish I was dead!"

"Come! come!" interposed Lady Winwood. "It's time to be serious. Natalie's birthday, Mr. Linzie, is next Christmas-day. She will be sixteen--"

"At seven in the morning," said Launce; "I got that out of Sir Joseph. At one minute past seven, Greenwich mean time, we may be off together. I got that out of the lawyer."

"And it isn't an eternity to wait from now till Christmas-day. You get that, by way of completing the list of your acquisitions, out of me. In the mean time, can you, or can you not, manage to meet the difficulties in the way of the marriage?"

"I have settled everything," Launce answered, confidently. "There is not a single difficulty left."

He turned to Natalie, listening to him in amazement, and explained himself. It had struck him that he might appeal--with his purse in his hand, of course--to the interest felt in his affairs by the late stewardess of the yacht. That excellent woman had volunteered to do all that she could to help him. Her husband had obtained situations for his wife and himself on board another yacht--and they were both eager to assist in any conspiracy in which their late merciless master was destined to play the part of victim. When on shore, they lived in a populous London parish, far away from the fashionable district of Berkeley Square, and further yet from the respectable suburb of Muswell Hill. A room in the house could be nominally engaged for Natalie, in the assumed character of the stewardess's niece--the stewardess undertaking to answer any purely formal questions which might be put by the church authorities, and to be present at the marriage ceremony. As for Launce, he would actually, as well as nominally, live in the district close by; and the steward, if needful, would answer for him. Natalie might call at her parochial residence occasionally, under the wing of Lady Winwood; gaining

leave of absence from Muswell Hill, on the plea of paying one of her customary visits at her aunt's house. The conspiracy, in brief, was arranged in all its details. Nothing was now wanting but the consent of the young lady; obtaining which, Launce would go to the parish church and give the necessary notice of a marriage by banns on the next day. There was the plot. What did the ladies think of it?

Lady Winwood thought it perfect.

Natalie was not so easily satisfied.

"My father has always been so kind to me!" she said. "The one thing I can't get over, Launce, is distressing papa. If he had been hard on me--as some fathers are--I shouldn't mind." She suddenly brightened, as if she saw her position in a new light. "Why should you hurry me?" she asked. "I am going to dine at my aunt's to-day, and you are coming in the evening. Give me time! Wait till to-night."

Launce instantly entered his protest against wasting a moment longer. Lady Winwood opened her lips to support him. They were both silenced at the same moment by the appearance of one of Mrs. Sancroft's servants, opening the gate of the square.

Lady Winwood went forward to meet the man. A suspicion crossed her mind that he might be bringing bad news.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon, my lady--the housekeeper said you were walking here with Miss Graybrooke. A telegram for Miss Graybrooke."

Lady Winwood took the telegram from the man's hand; dismissed him, and went back with it to Natalie. Natalie opened it nervously. She read the message--and instantly changed. Her cheeks flushed deep; her eyes flashed with indignation. "Even papa can be hard on me, it seems, when Richard asks him!" she exclaimed. She handed the telegram to Launce. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "You love me," she said, gently--and stopped. "Marry me!" she added, with a sudden burst of resolution. "I'll risk it!"

As she spoke those words, Lady Winwood read the telegram. It ran thus:

"Sir Joseph Graybrooke, Muswell Hill. To Miss Natalie Graybrooke; Berkeley Square. Come back immediately. You are engaged to dine here with Richard

Turlington."

Lady Winwood folded up the telegram with a malicious smile. "Well done, Sir Joseph!" thought her ladyship. "We might never have persuaded Natalie--but for You!"