

SEVENTH SCENE - The Evening Party.

----- MR. TURLINGTON,

LADY WINWOOD At Home.

Wednesday, December 15th.--Ten o'clock. -----

"Dearest Natalie--As the brute insists, the brute must have the invitation which I inclose. Never mind, my child. You and Launce are coming to dinner, and I will see that you have your little private opportunities of retirement afterward. All I expect of you in return is, not to look (when you come back) as if your husband had been kissing you. You will certainly let out the secret of those stolen kisses, if you don't take care. At mamma's dinner yesterday, your color (when you came out of the conservatory) was a sight to see. Even your shoulders were red! They are charming shoulders, I know, and men take the strangest fancies sometimes. But, my dear, suppose you wear a chemisette next time, if you haven't authority enough over him to prevent his doing it again!

"Your affectionate LOUISA."

The private history of the days that had passed since the marriage was written in that letter. An additional chapter--of some importance in its bearing on the future--was contributed by the progress of events at Lady Winwood's party.

By previous arrangement with Natalie, the Graybrookes (invited to dinner) arrived early. Leaving her husband and her stepdaughters to entertain Sir Joseph and Miss Lavinia, Lady Winwood took Natalie into her own boudoir, which communicated by a curtained opening with the drawing-room.

"My dear, you are looking positively haggard this evening. Has anything happened?"

"I am nearly worn out, Louisa. The life I am leading is so unendurable that, if Launce pressed me, I believe I should consent to run away with him when we leave your house tonight."

"You will do nothing of the sort, if you please. Wait till you are sixteen. I delight in novelty, but the novelty of appearing at the Old Bailey is beyond my ambition. Is the brute coming to-night?"

"Of course. He insists on following me wherever I go. He lunched at Muswell Hill today. More complaints of my incomprehensible coldness to him. Another scolding from papa. A furious letter from Launce. If I let Richard kiss my hand again in his presence, Launce warns me he will knock him down. Oh, the meanness and the guiltiness of the life I am leading now! I am in the falsest of all false positions, Louisa, and you encouraged me to do it. I believe Richard Turlington suspects us. The last two times Launce and I tried to get a minute together at my aunt's, he contrived to put himself in our way. There he was, my dear, with his scowling face, looking as if he longed to kill Launce. Can you do anything for us tonight? Not on my account. But Launce is so impatient. If he can't say two words to me alone this evening, he declares he will come to Muswell Hill, and catch me in the garden tomorrow."

"Compose yourself, my dear; he shall say his two words to-night."

"How?"

Lady Winwood pointed through the curtained entrance of the boudoir to the door of the drawing-room. Beyond the door was the staircase landing. And beyond the landing was a second drawing-room, the smaller of the two.

"There are only three or four people coming to dinner," her ladyship proceeded; "and a few more in the evening. Being a small party, the small drawing-room will do for us. This drawing-room will not be lighted, and there will be only my reading-lamp here in the boudoir. I shall give the signal for leaving the dining-room earlier than usual. Launce will join us before the evening party begins. The moment he appears, send him in here--boldly before your aunt and all of us."

"For what?"

"For your fan. Leave it there under the sofa-cushion before we go down to dinner. You will sit next to Launce, and you will give him private instructions not to find the fan. You will get impatient--you will go to find it yourself--and there you are. Take care of your shoulders, Mrs. Linzie! I have nothing more to say."

The guests asked to dinner began to arrive. Lady Winwood was recalled to her duties as mistress of the house.

It was a pleasant little dinner--with one drawback. It began too late. The ladies only reached the small drawing-room at ten minutes to ten. Launce was only able to join them as the clock struck.

"Too late!" whispered Natalie. "He will be here directly."

"Nobody comes punctually to an evening party," said Launce. "Don't let us lose a moment. Send me for your fan."

Natalie opened her lips to say the necessary words. Before she could speak, the servant announced--"Mr. Turlington."

He came in, with his stiffly-upright shirt collar and his loosely-fitting glossy black clothes. He made his sullen and clumsy bow to Lady Winwood. And then he did, what he had done dozens of times already--he caught Natalie, with her eyes still bright and her face still animated (after talking to Launce)--a striking contrast to the cold and unimpulsive young lady whom he was accustomed to see while Natalie was talking to him.

Lord Winwood's daughters were persons of some celebrity in the world of amateur music. Noticing the look that Turlington cast at Launce, Lady Winwood whispered to Miss Lavinia--who instantly asked the young ladies to sing. Launce, in obedience to a sign from Natalie, volunteered to find the music-books. It is needless to add that he pitched on the wrong volume at starting. As he lifted it from the piano to take it back to the stand, there dropped out from between the leaves a printed letter, looking like a circular. One of the young ladies took it up, and ran her eye over it, with a start.

"The Sacred Concerts!" she exclaimed.

Her two sisters, standing by, looked at each other guiltily: "What will the Committee say to us? We entirely forgot the meeting last month."

"Is there a meeting this month?"

They all looked anxiously at the printed letter.

"Yes! The twenty-third of December. Put it down in your book, Amelia." Amelia, then and there, put it down among the engagements for the latter end of the month. And Natalie's unacknowledged husband placidly looked

on.

So did the merciless irony of circumstances make Launce the innocent means of exposing his own secret to discovery. Thanks to his success in laying his hand on the wrong music-book, there would now be a meeting--two good days before the elopement could take place--between the lord's daughters and the rector's wife!

The guests of the evening began to appear by twos and threes. The gentlemen below stairs left the dinner-table, and joined them.

The small drawing-room was pleasantly filled, and no more. Sir Joseph Graybrooke, taking Turlington's hand, led him eagerly to their host. The talk in the dining-room had turned on finance. Lord Winwood was not quite satisfied with some of his foreign investments; and Sir Joseph's "dear Richard" was the very man to give him a little sound advice. The three laid their heads together in a corner. Launce (watching them) slyly pressed Natalie's hand. A renowned "virtuoso" had arrived, and was thundering on the piano. The attention of the guests generally was absorbed in the performance. A fairer chance of sending Launce for the fan could not possibly have offered itself. While the financial discussion was still proceeding, the married lovers were ensconced together alone in the boudoir.

Lady Winwood (privately observant of their absence) kept her eye on the corner, watching Richard Turlington.

He was talking earnestly--with his back toward the company. He neither moved nor looked round. It came to Lord Winwood's turn to speak. He preserved the same position, listening. Sir Joseph took up the conversation next. Then his attention wandered--he knew beforehand what Sir Joseph would say. His eyes turned anxiously toward the place in which he had left Natalie. Lord Winwood said a word. His head turned back again toward the corner. Sir Joseph put an objection. He glanced once more over his shoulder--this time at the place in which Launce had been standing. The next moment his host recalled his attention, and made it impossible for him to continue his scrutiny of the room. At the same times two among the evening guests, bound for another party, approached to take leave of the lady of the house. Lady Winwood was obliged to rise, and attend to them. They had something to say to her before they left, and they said it at terrible length, standing so as to intercept her view of the proceedings of the enemy. When she had got rid of them at last, she looked--and behold Lord Winwood and Sir Joseph were the only occupants of the corner!

Delaying one moment, to set the "virtuoso" thundering once more, Lady Winwood slipped out of the room and crossed the landing. At the entrance to the empty drawing-room she heard Turlington's voice, low and threatening, in the boudoir. Jealousy has a Second Sight of its own. He had looked in the right place at starting--and, oh heavens! he had caught them.

Her ladyship's courage was beyond dispute; but she turned pale as she approached the entrance to the boudoir.

There stood Natalie--at once angry and afraid--between the man to whom she was ostensibly engaged, and the man to whom she was actually married. Turlington's rugged face expressed a martyrdom of suppressed fury. Launce--in the act of offering Natalie her fan--smiled, with the cool superiority of a man who knew that he had won his advantage, and who triumphed in knowing it.

"I forbid you to take your fan from that man's hands," said Turlington, speaking to Natalie, and pointing to Launce.

"Isn't it rather too soon to begin 'forbidding'?" asked Lady Winwood, good-humoredly.

"Exactly what I say!" exclaimed Launce. "It seems necessary to remind Mr. Turlington that he is not married to Natalie yet!"

Those last words were spoken in a tone which made both the women tremble inwardly for results. Lady Winwood took the fan from Launce with one hand, and took Natalie's arm with the other.

"There is your fan, my dear," she said, in her easy off-hand manner. "Why do you allow these two barbarous men to keep you here while the great Bootmann is playing the Nightmare Sonata in the next room? Launce! Mr. Turlington! follow me, and learn to be musical directly! You have only to shut your eyes, and you will fancy you hear four modern German composers playing, instead of one, and not the ghost of a melody among all the four." She led the way out with Natalie, and whispered, "Did he catch you?" Natalie whispered back, "I heard him in time. He only caught us looking for the fan." The two men waited behind to have two words together alone in the boudoir.

"This doesn't end here, Mr. Linzie!"

Launce smiled satirically. "For once I agree with you," he answered. "It

doesn't end here, as you say."

Lady Winwood stopped, and looked back at them from the drawing-room door. They were keeping her waiting--they had no choice but to follow the mistress of the house.

Arrived in the next room, both Turlington and Launce resumed their places among the guests with the same object in view. As a necessary result of the scene in the boudoir, each had his own special remonstrance to address to Sir Joseph. Even here, Launce was beforehand with Turlington. He was the first to get possession of Sir Joseph's private ear. His complaint took the form of a protest against Turlington's jealousy, and an appeal for a reconsideration of the sentence which excluded him from Muswell Hill. Watching them from a distance, Turlington's suspicious eye detected the appearance of something unduly confidential in the colloquy between the two. Under cover of the company, he stole behind them and listened.

The great Bootmann had arrived at that part of the Nightmare Sonata in which musical sound, produced principally with the left hand, is made to describe, beyond all possibility of mistake, the rising of the moon in a country church-yard and a dance of Vampires round a maiden's grave. Sir Joseph, having no chance against the Vampires in a whisper, was obliged to raise his voice to make himself audible in answering and comforting Launce. "I sincerely sympathize with you," Turlington heard him say; "and Natalie feels about it as I do. But Richard is an obstacle in our way. We must look to the consequences, my dear boy, supposing Richard found us out." He nodded kindly to his nephew; and, declining to pursue the subject, moved away to another part of the room.

Turlington's jealous distrust, wrought to the highest pitch of irritability for weeks past, instantly associated the words he had just heard with the words spoken by Launce in the boudoir, which had reminded him that he was not married to Natalie yet. Was there treachery at work under the surface? and was the object to persuade weak Sir Joseph to reconsider his daughter's contemplated marriage in a sense favorable to Launce? Turlington's blind suspicion overleaped at a bound all the manifest improbabilities which forbade such a conclusion as this. After an instant's consideration with himself, he decided on keeping his own counsel, and on putting Sir Joseph's good faith then and there to a test which he could rely on as certain to take Natalie's father by surprise.

"Graybrooke!"

Sir Joseph started at the sight of his future son-in-law's face.

"My dear Richard, you are looking very strangely! Is the heat of the room too much for you?"

"Never mind the heat! I have seen enough to-night to justify me in insisting that your daughter and Launcelot Linzie shall meet no more between this and the day of my marriage." Sir Joseph attempted to speak. Turlington declined to give him the opportunity. "Yes! yes! your opinion of Linzie isn't mine, I know. I saw you as thick as thieves together just now." Sir Joseph once more attempted to make himself heard. Wearied by Turlington's perpetual complaints of his daughter and his nephew, he was sufficiently irritated by this time to have reported what Launce had actually said to him if he had been allowed the chance. But Turlington persisted in going on. "I cannot prevent Linzie from being received in this house, and at your sister's," he said; "but I can keep him out of my house in the country, and to the country let us go. I propose a change in the arrangements. Have you any engagement for the Christmas holidays?"

He paused, and fixed his eyes attentively on Sir Joseph. Sir Joseph, looking a little surprised, replied briefly that he had no engagement.

"In that case," resumed Turlington, "I invite you all to Somersetshire, and I propose that the marriage shall take place from my house, and not from yours. Do you refuse?"

"It is contrary to the usual course of proceeding in such cases, Richard," Sir Joseph began.

"Do you refuse?" reiterated Turlington. "I tell you plainly, I shall place a construction of my own upon your motive if you do."

"No, Richard," said Sir Joseph, quietly, "I accept."

Turlington drew back a step in silence. Sir Joseph had turned the tables on him, and had taken him by surprise.

"It will upset several plans, and be strongly objected to by the ladies," proceeded the old gentleman. "But if nothing less will satisfy you, I say, Yes! I shall have occasion, when we meet to-morrow at Muswell Hill, to appeal to your indulgence under circumstances which may greatly astonish you. The least I can do, in the meantime, is to set an example of friendly sympathy and forbearance on my side. No more now, Richard. Hush! the music!"

It was impossible to make him explain himself further that night. Turlington was left to interpret Sir Joseph's mysterious communication with such doubtful aid to success as his own unassisted ingenuity might afford.

The meeting of the next day at Muswell Hill had for its object--as Turlington had already been informed--the drawing of Natalie's marriage-settlement. Was the question of money at the bottom of Sir Joseph's contemplated appeal to his indulgence? He thought of his commercial position. The depression in the Levant trade still continued. Never had his business at any previous time required such constant attention, and repaid that attention with so little profit. The Bills of Lading had been already used by the firm, in the ordinary course of trade, to obtain possession of the goods. The duplicates in the hands of Bulpit Brothers were literally waste paper. Repayment of the loan of forty thousand pounds (with interest) was due in less than a month's time. There was his commercial position! Was it possible that money-loving Sir Joseph had any modification to propose in the matter of his daughter's dowry? The bare dread that it might be so struck him cold. He quitted the house--and forgot to wish Natalie goodnight.

Meanwhile, Launce had left the evening party before him--and Launce also found matter for serious reflection presented to his mind before he slept that night. In other words, he found, on reaching his lodgings, a letter from his brother marked "private." Had the inquiry into the secrets of Turlington's early life--now prolonged over some weeks--led to positive results at last? Launce eagerly opened the letter. It contained a Report and a Summary. He passed at once to the Summary, and read these words:

"If you only want moral evidence to satisfy your own mind, your end is gained. There is, morally, no doubt that Turlington and the sea-captain who cast the foreign sailor overboard to drown are one and the same man. Legally, the matter is beset by difficulties, Turlington having destroyed all provable connection between his present self and his past life. There is only one chance for us. A sailor on board the ship (who was in his master's secrets) is supposed to be still living (under his master's protection). All the black deeds of Turlington's early life are known to this man. He can prove the facts, if we can find him, and make it worth his while to speak. Under what alias he is hidden we do not know. His own name is Thomas Wildfang. If we are to make the attempt to find him, not a moment is to be lost. The expenses may be serious. Let me know whether we are to go on, or whether enough has been done to attain the end you have in view."

Enough had been done--not only to satisfy Launce, but to produce the right

effect on Sir Joseph's mind if Sir Joseph proved obdurate when the secret of the marriage was revealed. Launce wrote a line directing the stoppage of the proceedings at the point which they had now reached. "Here is a reason for her not marrying Turlington," he said to himself, as he placed the papers under lock and key. "And if she doesn't marry Turlington," he added, with a lover's logic, "why shouldn't she marry Me?"