

NINTH SCENE - The Drawing-Room.

"Amelia!"

"Say something."

"Ask him to sit down."

Thus addressing one another in whispers, the three stepdaughters of Lady Winwood stood bewildered in their own drawing-room, helplessly confronting an object which appeared before them on the threshold of the door.

The date was the 23d of December. The time was between two and three in the afternoon. The occasion was the return of the three sisters from the Committee meeting of the Sacred Concerts' Society. And the object was Richard Turlington.

He stood hat in hand at the door, amazed by his reception. "I have come up this morning from Somersetshire," he said. "Haven't you heard? A matter of business at the office has forced me to leave my guests at my house in the country. I return to them to-morrow. When I say my guests, I mean the Graybrookes. Don't you know they are staying with me? Sir Joseph and Miss Lavinia and Natalie?" On the utterance of Natalie's name, the sisters roused themselves. They turned about and regarded each other with looks of dismay. Turlington's patience began to fail him. "Will you be so good as to tell me what all this means?" he said, a little sharply. "Miss Lavinia asked me to call here when she heard I was coming to town. I was to take charge of a pattern for a dress, which she said you would give me. You ought to have received a telegram explaining it all, hours since. Has the message not reached you?"

The leading spirit of the three sisters was Miss Amelia. She was the first who summoned presence of mind enough to give a plain answer to Turlington's plain question.

"We received the telegram this morning," she said. "Something has happened since which has shocked and surprised us. We beg your pardon." She turned to one of her sisters. "Sophia, the pattern is ready in the drawer of that table behind you. Give it to Mr. Turlington."

Sophia produced the packet. Before she handed it to the visitor, she looked at her sister. "Ought we to let Mr. Turlington go," she asked, "as if nothing had happened?"

Amelia considered silently with herself. Dorothea, the third sister (who had not spoken yet), came forward with a suggestion. She proposed, before proceeding further, to inquire whether Lady Winwood was in the house. The idea was instantly adopted. Sophia rang the bell. Amelia put the questions when the servant appeared.

Lady Winwood had left the house for a drive immediately after luncheon. Lord Winwood--inquired for next--had accompanied her ladyship. No message had been left indicating the hour of their return.

The sisters looked at Turlington, uncertain what to say or do next. Miss Amelia addressed him as soon as the servant had left the room.

"Is it possible for you to remain here until either my father or Lady Winwood return?" she asked.

"It is quite impossible. Minutes are of importance to me to-day."

"Will you give us one of your minutes? We want to consider something which we may have to say to you before you go."

Turlington, wondering, took a chair. Miss Amelia put the case before her sisters from the sternly conscientious point of view, at the opposite end of the room.

"We have not found out this abominable deception by any underhand means," she said. "The discovery has been forced upon us, and we stand pledged to nobody to keep the secret. Knowing as we do how cruelly this gentleman has been used, it seems to me that we are bound in honor to open his eyes to the truth. If we remain silent we make ourselves Lady Winwood's accomplices. I, for one--I don't care what may come of it--refuse to do that."

Her sisters agreed with her. The first chance their clever stepmother had given them of asserting their importance against hers was now in their hands. Their jealous hatred of Lady Winwood assumed the mask of Duty--duty toward an outraged and deceived fellow-creature. Could any earthly motive be purer than that? "Tell him, Amelia!" cried the two young ladies, with the headlong recklessness of the sex which only stops to think when

the time for reflection has gone by.

A vague sense of something wrong began to stir uneasily in Turlington's mind.

"Don't let me hurry you," he said, "but if you really have anything to tell me--"

Miss Amelia summoned her courage, and began.

"We have something very dreadful to tell you," she said, interrupting him. "You have been presented in this house, Mr. Turlington, as a gentleman engaged to marry Lady Winwood's cousin. Miss Natalie Graybrooke." She paused there--at the outset of the disclosure. A sudden change of expression passed over Turlington's face, which daunted her for the moment. "We have hitherto understood," she went on, "that you were to be married to that young lady early in next month."

"Well?"

He could say that one word. Looking at their pale faces, and their eager eyes, he could say no more.

"Take care!" whispered Dorothea, in her sister's ear. "Look at him, Amelia! Not too soon."

Amelia went on more carefully.

"We have just returned from a musical meeting," she said. "One of the ladies there was an acquaintance, a former school-fellow of ours. She is the wife of the rector of St. Columb Major--a large church, far from this--at the East End of London."

"I know nothing about the woman or the church," interposed Turlington, sternly.

"I must beg you to wait a little. I can't tell you what I want to tell you unless I refer to the rector's wife. She knows Lady Winwood by name. And she heard of Lady Winwood recently under very strange circumstances--circumstances connected with a signature in one of the books of the church."

Turlington lost his self-control. "You have got something against my

Natalie," he burst out; "I know it by your whispering, I see it in your looks! Say it at once in plain words."

There was no trifling with him now. In plain words Amelia said it.

* * * * *

There was silence in the room. They could hear the sound of passing footsteps in the street. He stood perfectly still on the spot where they had struck him dumb by the disclosure, supporting himself with his right hand laid on the head of a sofa near him. The sisters drew back horror-struck into the furthest corner of the room. His face turned them cold. Through the mute misery which it had expressed at first, there appeared, slowly forcing its way to view, a look of deadly vengeance which froze them to the soul. They whispered feverishly one to the other, without knowing what they were talking of, without hearing their own voices. One of them said, "Ring the bell!" Another said, "Offer him something, he will faint." The third shuddered, and repeated, over and over again, "Why did we do it? Why did we do it?"

He silenced them on the instant by speaking on his side. He came on slowly, by a step at a time, with the big drops of agony falling slowly over his rugged face. He said, in a hoarse whisper, "Write me down the name of the church--there." He held out his open pocketbook to Amelia while he spoke. She steadied herself, and wrote the address. She tried to say a word to soften him. The word died on her lips. There was a light in his eyes as they looked at her which transfigured his face to something superhuman and devilish. She turned away from him, shuddering.

He put the book back in his pocket, and passed his handkerchief over his face. After a moment of indecision, he suddenly and swiftly stole out of the room, as if he was afraid of their calling somebody in, and stopping him. At the door he turned round for a moment, and said, "You will hear how this ends. I wish you good-morning."

The door closed on him. Left by themselves, they began to realize it. They thought of the consequences when his back was turned and it was too late.

The Graybrookes! Now he knew it, what would become of the Graybrookes? What would he do when he got back? Even at ordinary times--when he was on his best behavior--he was a rough man. What would happen? Oh, good God! what would happen when he and Natalie next stood face to face? It was a lonely house--Natalie had told them about it--no neighbors near; nobody

by to interfere but the weak old father and the maiden aunt. Something ought to be done. Some steps ought to be taken to warn them. Advice--who could give advice? Who was the first person who ought to be told of what had happened? Lady Winwood? No! even at that crisis the sisters still shrank from their stepmother--still hated her with the old hatred! Not a word to her! They owed no duty to her! Who else could they appeal to? To their father? Yes! There was the person to advise them. In the meanwhile, silence toward their stepmother--silence toward every one till their father came back!

They waited and waited. One after another the precious hours, pregnant with the issues of life and death, followed each other on the dial. Lady Winwood returned alone. She had left her husband at the House of Lords. Dinner-time came, and brought with it a note from his lordship. There was a debate at the House. Lady Winwood and his daughters were not to wait dinner for him.