

TWELFTH SCENE - Inside the House.

The scene in the drawing-room represented the ideal of domestic comfort. The fire of wood and coal mixed burned brightly; the lamps shed a soft glow of light; the solid shutters and the thick red curtains kept the cold night air on the outer side of two long windows, which opened on the back garden. Snug arm-chairs were placed in every part of the room. In one of them Sir Joseph reclined, fast asleep; in another, Miss Lavinia sat knitting; a third chair, apart from the rest, near a round table in one corner of the room, was occupied by Natalie. Her head was resting on her hand, an unread book lay open on her lap. She looked pale and harassed; anxiety and suspense had worn her down to the shadow of her former self. On entering the room, Turlington purposely closed the door with a bang. Natalie started. Miss Lavinia looked up reproachfully. The object was achieved--Sir Joseph was roused from his sleep.

"If you are going to the vicar's to-night. Graybrooke," said Turlington, "it's time you were off, isn't it?"

Sir Joseph rubbed his eyes, and looked at the clock on the mantel-piece. "Yes, yes, Richard," he answered, drowsily, "I suppose I must go. Where is my hat?"

His sister and his daughter both joined in trying to persuade him to send an excuse instead of groping his way to the vicarage in the dark. Sir Joseph hesitated, as usual. He and the vicar had run up a sudden friendship, on the strength of their common enthusiasm for the old-fashioned game of backgammon. Victorious over his opponent on the previous evening at Turlington's house, Sir Joseph had promised to pass that evening at the vicarage, and give the vicar his revenge. Observing his indecision, Turlington cunningly irritated him by affecting to believe that he was really unwilling to venture out in the dark. "I'll see you safe across the churchyard," he said; "and the vicar's servant will see you safe back." The tone in which he spoke instantly roused Sir Joseph. "I am not in my second childhood yet, Richard," he replied, testily. "I can find my way by myself." He kissed his daughter on the forehead. "No fear, Natalie. I shall be back in time for the mulled claret. No, Richard, I won't trouble you." He kissed his hand to his sister and went out into the hall for his hat: Turlington following him with a rough apology, and asking as a favor to be permitted to accompany him part of the way only. The ladies, left behind in the drawing-room, heard the apology accepted by kind-hearted Sir Joseph. The two went out together.

"Have you noticed Richard since his return?" asked Miss Lavinia. "I fancy he must have heard bad news in London. He looks as if he had something on his mind."

"I haven't remarked it, aunt."

For the time, no more was said. Miss Lavinia went monotonously on with her knitting. Natalie pursued her own anxious thoughts over the unread pages of the book in her lap. Suddenly the deep silence out of doors and in was broken by a shrill whistle, sounding from the direction of the churchyard. Natalie started with a faint cry of alarm. Miss Lavinia looked up from her knitting.

"My dear child, your nerves must be sadly out of order. What is there to be frightened at?"

"I am not very well, aunt. It is so still here at night, the slightest noises startle me."

There was another interval of silence. It was past nine o'clock when they heard the back door opened and closed again. Turlington came hurriedly into the drawing-room, as if he had some reason for wishing to rejoin the ladies as soon as possible. To the surprise of both of them, he sat down abruptly in the corner, with his face to the wall, and took up the newspaper, without casting a look at them or uttering a word.

"Is Joseph safe at the vicarage?" asked Miss Lavinia.

"All right." He gave the answer in a short, surly tone, still without looking round.

Miss Lavinia tried him again. "Did you hear a whistle while you were out? It quite startled Natalie in the stillness of this place."

He turned half-way round. "My shepherd, I suppose," he said after a pause-- "whistling for his dog." He turned back again and immersed himself in his newspaper.

Miss Lavinia beckoned to her niece and pointed significantly to Turlington. After one reluctant look at him, Natalie laid her head wearily on her aunt's shoulder. "Sleepy, my dear?" whispered the old lady. "Uneasy, aunt--I don't know why," Natalie whispered back. "I would give the world to be in London,

and to hear the carriages going by, and the people talking in the street."

Turlington suddenly dropped his newspaper. "What's the secret between you two?" he called out roughly. "What are you whispering about?"

"We wish not to disturb you over your reading, that is all," said Miss Lavinia, coldly. "Has anything happened to vex you, Richard?"

"What the devil makes you think that?"

The old lady was offended, and showed it by saying nothing more. Natalie nestled closer to her aunt. One after another the clock ticked off the minutes with painful distinctness in the stillness of the room. Turlington suddenly threw aside the newspaper and left his corner. "Let's be good friends!" he burst out, with a clumsy assumption of gayety. "This isn't keeping Christmas-eve. Let's talk and be sociable. Dearest Natalie!" He threw his arm roughly round Natalie, and drew her by main force away from her aunt. She turned deadly pale, and struggled to release herself. "I am suffering--I am ill--let me go!" He was deaf to her entreaties. "What! your husband that is to be, treated in this way? Mustn't I have a kiss?--I will!" He held her closer with one hand, and, seizing her head with the other, tried to turn her lips to him. She resisted with the inbred nervous strength which the weakest woman living has in reserve when she is outraged. Half indignant, half terrified, at Turlington's roughness, Miss Lavinia rose to interfere. In a moment more he would have had two women to overpower instead of one, when a noise outside the window suddenly suspended the ignoble struggle.

There was a sound of footsteps on the gravel-walk which ran between the house wall and the garden lawn. It was followed by a tap--a single faint tap, no more--on one of the panes of glass.

They all three stood still. For a moment more nothing was audible. Then there was a heavy shock, as of something falling outside. Then a groan, then another interval of silence--a long silence, interrupted no more.

Turlington's arm dropped from Natalie. She drew back to her aunt. Looking at him instinctively, in the natural expectation that he would take the lead in penetrating the mystery of what had happened outside the window, the two women were thunderstruck to see that he was, to all appearance, even more startled and more helpless than they were. "Richard," said Miss Lavinia, pointing to the window, "there is something wrong out there. See what it is." He stood motionless, as if he had not heard her, his eyes fixed on the window, his face livid with terror.

The silence outside was broken once more; this time by a call for help.

A cry of horror burst from Natalie. The voice outside--rising wildly, then suddenly dying away again--was not entirely strange to her ears. She tore aside the curtain. With voice and hand she roused her aunt to help her. The two lifted the heavy bar from its socket; they opened the shutters and the window. The cheerful light of the room flowed out over the body of a prostrate man, lying on his face. They turned the man over. Natalie lifted his head.

Her father!

His face was bedabbled with blood. A wound, a frightful wound, was visible on the side of his bare head, high above the ear. He looked at her, his eyes recognized her, before he fainted again in her arms. His hands and his clothes were covered with earth stains. He must have traversed some distance; in that dreadful condition he must have faltered and fallen more than once before he reached the house. His sister wiped the blood from his face. His daughter called on him frantically to forgive her before he died--the harmless, gentle, kind-hearted father, who had never said a hard word to her! The father whom she had deceived!

The terrified servants hurried into the room. Their appearance roused their master from the extraordinary stupor that had seized him. He was at the window before the footman could get there. The two lifted Sir Joseph into the room, and laid him on the sofa. Natalie knelt by him, supporting his head. Miss Lavinia stanchd the flowing blood with her handkerchief. The women-servants brought linen and cold water. The man hurried away for the doctor, who lived on the other side of the village. Left alone again with Turlington, Natalie noticed that his eyes were fixed in immovable scrutiny on her father's head. He never said a word. He looked, looked, looked at the wound.

The doctor arrived. Before either the daughter or the sister of the injured man could put the question, Turlington put it--"Will he live or die?"

The doctor's careful finger probed the wound.

"Make your minds easy. A little lower down, or in front, the blow might have been serious. As it is, there is no harm done. Keep him quiet, and he will be all right again in two or three days."

Hearing those welcome words, Natalie and her aunt sank on their knees in silent gratitude. After dressing the wound, the doctor looked round for the master of the house. Turlington, who had been so breathlessly eager but a few minutes since, seemed to have lost all interest in the case now. He stood apart, at the window, looking out toward the church-yard, thinking. The questions which it was the doctor's duty to ask were answered by the ladies. The servants assisted in examining the injured man's clothes: they discovered that his watch and purse were both missing. When it became necessary to carry him upstairs, it was the footman who assisted the doctor. The foot man's master, without a word of explanation, walked out bare headed into the back garden, on the search, as the doctor and the servants supposed, for some trace of the robber who had attempted Sir Joseph's life.

His absence was hardly noticed at the time. The difficulty of conveying the wounded man to his room absorbed the attention of all the persons present.

Sir Joseph partially recovered his senses while they were taking him up the steep and narrow stairs. Carefully as they carried the patient, the motion wrung a groan from him before they reached the top. The bedroom corridor, in the rambling, irregularly built house rose and fell on different levels. At the door of the first bedchamber the doctor asked a little anxiously if that was the room. No; there were three more stairs to go down, and a corner to turn, before they could reach it. The first room was Natalie's. She instantly offered it for her father's use. The doctor (seeing that it was the airiest as well as the nearest room) accepted the proposal. Sir Joseph had been laid comfortably in his daughter's bed; the doctor had just left them, with renewed assurances that they need feel no anxiety, when they heard a heavy step below stairs. Turlington had re-entered the house.

(He had been looking, as they had supposed, for the ruffian who had attacked Sir Joseph; with a motive, however, for the search at which it was impossible for other persons to guess. His own safety was now bound up in the safety of Thomas Wildfang. As soon as he was out of sight in the darkness, he made straight for the malt-house. The change of clothes was there untouched; not a trace of his accomplice was to be seen. Where else to look for him it was impossible to tell. Turlington had no alternative but to go back to the house, and ascertain if suspicion had been aroused in his absence.)

He had only to ascend the stairs, and to see, through the open door, that Sir Joseph had been placed in his daughter's room.

"What does this mean?" he asked, roughly.

Before it was possible to answer him the footman appeared with a message. The doctor had come back to the door to say that he would take on himself the necessary duty of informing the constable of what had happened, on his return to the village. Turlington started and changed color. If Wildfang was found by others, and questioned in his employer's absence, serious consequences might follow. "The constable is my business," said Turlington, hurriedly descending the stairs; "I'll go with the doctor." They heard him open the door below, then close it again (as if some sudden thought had struck him), and call to the footman. The house was badly provided with servants' bedrooms. The women-servants only slept indoors. The footman occupied a room over the stables. Natalie and her aunt heard Turlington dismiss the man for the night, an hour earlier than usual at least. His next proceeding was stranger still. Looking cautiously over the stairs, Natalie saw him lock all the doors on the ground-floor and take out the keys. When he went away, she heard him lock the front door behind him. Incredible as it seemed, there could be no doubt of the fact--the inmates of the house were imprisoned till he came back. What did it mean?

(It meant that Turlington's vengeance still remained to be wreaked on the woman who had deceived him. It meant that Sir Joseph's life still stood between the man who had compassed his death and the money which the man was resolved to have. It meant that Richard Turlington was driven to bay, and that the horror and the peril of the night were not at an end yet.)

Natalie and her aunt looked at each other across the bed on which Sir Joseph lay. He had fallen into a kind of doze; no enlightenment could come to them from him. They could only ask each other, with beating hearts and baffled minds, what Richard's conduct meant--they could only feel instinctively that some dreadful discovery was hanging over them. The aunt was the calmer of the two--there was no secret weighing heavily on her conscience. She could feel the consolations of religion. "Our dear one is spared to us, my love," said the old lady, gently. "God has been good to us. We are in his hands. If we know that, we know enough."

As she spoke there was a loud ring at the doorbell. The women-servants crowded into the bedroom in alarm. Strong in numbers, and encouraged by Natalie--who roused herself and led the way--they confronted the risk of opening the window and of venturing out on the balcony which extended along that side of the house. A man was dimly visible below. He called to them in thick, unsteady accents. The servants recognized him: he was the telegraphic messenger from the railway. They went down to speak to him--and returned with a telegram which had been pushed in under the door.

The distance from the station was considerable; the messenger had been "keeping Christmas" in more than one beer-shop on his way to the house; and the delivery of the telegram had been delayed for some hours. It was addressed to Natalie. She opened it--looked at it--dropped it--and stood speechless; her lips parted in horror, her eyes staring vacantly straight before her.

Miss Lavinia took the telegram from the floor, and read these lines:

"Lady Winwood, Hertford Street, London. To Natalie Graybrooke, Church Meadows, Baxdale, Somersetshire. Dreadful news. R. T. has discovered your marriage to Launce. The truth has been kept from me till to-day (24th). Instant flight with your husband is your only chance. I would have communicated with Launce, but I do not know his address. You will receive this, I hope and believe, before R. T. can return to Somersetshire. Telegraph back, I entreat you, to say that you are safe. I shall follow my message if I do not hear from you in reasonable time."

Miss Lavinia lifted her gray head, and looked at her niece. "Is this true?" she said--and pointed to the venerable face laid back, white, on the white pillow of the bed. Natalie sank forward as her eyes met the eyes of her aunt. Miss Lavinia saved her from falling insensible on the floor.

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The confession had been made. The words of penitence and the words of pardon had been spoken. The peaceful face of the father still lay hushed in rest. One by one the minutes succeeded each other uneventfully in the deep tranquillity of the night. It was almost a relief when the silence was disturbed once more by another sound outside the house. A pebble was thrown up at the window, and a voice called out cautiously, "Miss Lavinia!"

They recognized the voice of the man-servant, and at once opened the window.

He had something to say to the ladies in private. How could he say it? A domestic circumstance which had been marked by Launce, as favorable to the contemplated elopement, was now noticed by the servant as lending itself readily to effecting the necessary communication with the ladies. The lock of the gardener's tool-house (in the shrubbery close by) was under repair; and the gardener's ladder was accessible to any one who wanted it. At the short height of the balcony from the ground, the ladder was more than long enough for the purpose required. In a few minutes the servant

had mounted to the balcony, and could speak to Natalie and her aunt at the window.

"I can't rest quiet," said the man, "I'm off on the sly to see what's going on down in the village. It's hard on ladies like you to be locked in here. Is there anything I can do for either of you?"

Natalie took up Lady Winwood's telegram. "Launce ought to see this," she said to her aunt. "He will be here at daybreak," she added, in a whisper, "if I don't tell him what has happened."

Miss Lavinia turned pale. "If he and Richard meet--" she began. "Tell him!" she added, hurriedly--"tell him before it is too late!"

Natalie wrote a few lines (addressed to Launce in his assumed name at his lodgings in the village) inclosing Lady Winwood's telegram, and entreating him to do nothing rash. When the servant had disappeared with the letter, there was one hope in her mind and in her aunt's mind, which each was ashamed to acknowledge to the other--the hope that Launce would face the very danger that they dreaded for him, and come to the house.

They had not been long alone again, when Sir Joseph drowsily opened his eyes and asked what they were doing in his room. They told him gently that he was ill. He put his hand up to his head, and said they were right, and so dropped off again into slumber. Worn out by the emotions through which they had passed, the two women silently waited for the march of events. The same stupor of resignation possessed them both. They had secured the door and the window. They had prayed together. They had kissed the quiet face on the pillow. They had said to each other, "We will live with him or die with him as God pleases." Miss Lavinia sat by the bedside. Natalie was on a stool at her feet--with her eyes closed, and her head on her aunt's knee.

Time went on. The clock in the hall had struck--ten or eleven, they were not sure which--when they heard the signal which warned them of the servant's return from the village. He brought news, and more than news; he brought a letter from Launce.

Natalie read these lines:

"I shall be with you, dearest, almost as soon as you receive this. The bearer will tell you what has happened in the village--your note throws a new light on it all. I only remain behind to go to the vicar (who is also the magistrate here), and declare myself your husband. All disguise must be at an end now.

My place is with you and yours. It is even worse than your worst fears. Turlington was at the bottom of the attack on your father. Judge if you have not need of your husband's protection after that!--L."

Natalie handed the letter to her aunt, and pointed to the sentence which asserted Turlington's guilty knowledge of the attempt on Sir Joseph's life. In silent horror the two women looked at each other, recalling what had happened earlier in the evening, and understanding it now. The servant roused them to a sense of present things, by entering on the narrative of his discoveries in the village.

The place was all astir when he reached it. An old man--a stranger in Baxdale--had been found lying in the road, close to the church, in a fit; and the person who had discovered him had been no other than Launce himself. He had, literally, stumbled over the body of Thomas Wildfang in the dark, on his way back to his lodgings in the village.

"The gentleman gave the alarm, miss," said the servant, describing the event, as it had been related to him, "and the man--a huge, big old man--was carried to the inn. The landlord identified him; he had taken lodgings at the inn that day, and the constable found valuable property on him--a purse of money and a gold watch and chain. There was nothing to show who the money and the watch belonged to. It was only when my master and the doctor got to the inn that it was known whom he had robbed and tried to murder. All he let out in his wanderings before they came was that some person had set him on to do it. He called the person 'Captain,' and sometimes 'Captain Goward.' It was thought--if you could trust the ravings of a madman--that the fit took him while he was putting his hand on Sir Joseph's heart to feel if it had stopped beating. A sort of vision (as I understand it) must have overpowered him at the moment. They tell me he raved about the sea bursting into the church yard, and a drowning sailor floating by on a hen-coop; a sailor who dragged him down to hell by the hair of his head, and such like horrible nonsense, miss. He was still screeching, at the worst of the fit, when my master and the doctor came into the room. At sight of one or other of them--it is thought of Mr. Turlington, seeing that he came first--he held his peace on a sudden, and then fell back in convulsions in the arms of the men who were holding him. The doctor gave it a learned name, signifying drink-madness, and said the case was hopeless. However, he ordered the room to be cleared of the crowd to see what he could do. My master was reported to be still with the doctor, waiting to see whether the man lived or died, when I left the village, miss, with the gentleman's answer to your note. I didn't dare stay to hear how it ended, for fear of Mr. Turlington's finding me out."

Having reached the end of his narrative, the man looked round restlessly toward the window. It was impossible to say when his master might not return, and it might be as much as his life was worth to be caught in the house after he had been locked out of it. He begged permission to open the window, and make his escape back to the stables while there was still time. As he unbarred the shutter they were startled by a voice hailing them from below. It was Launce's voice calling to Natalie. The servant disappeared, and Natalie was in Launce's arms before she could breathe again.

For one delicious moment she let her head lie on his breast; then she suddenly pushed him away from her. "Why do you come here? He will kill you if he finds you in the house. Where is he?"

Launce knew even less of Turlington's movements than the servant. "Wherever he is, thank God, I am here before him!" That was all the answer he could give.

Natalie and her aunt heard him in silent dismay. Sir Joseph woke, and recognized Launce before a word more could be said. "Ah, my dear boy!" he murmured, faintly. "It's pleasant to see you again. How do you come here?" He was quite satisfied with the first excuse that suggested itself. "We'll talk about it to-morrow," he said, and composed himself to rest again.

Natalie made a second attempt to persuade Launce to leave the house.

"We don't know what may have happened," she said. "He may have followed you on your way here. He may have purposely let you enter his house. Leave us while you have the chance."

Miss Lavinia added her persuasions. They were useless. Launce quietly closed the heavy window-shutters, lined with iron, and put up the bar. Natalie wrung her hands in despair.

"Have you been to the magistrate?" she asked. "Tell us, at least, are you here by his advice? Is he coming to help us?"

Launce hesitated. If he had told the truth, he must have acknowledged that he was there in direct opposition to the magistrate's advice. He answered evasively, "If the vicar doesn't come, the doctor will. I have told him Sir Joseph must be moved. Cheer up, Natalie! The doctor will be here as soon as Turlington."

As the name passed his lips--without a sound outside to prepare them for what was coming--the voice of Turlington himself suddenly penetrated into the room, speaking close behind the window, on the outer side.

"You have broken into my house in the night," said the voice. "And you don't escape this way."

Miss Lavinia sank on her knees. Natalie flew to her father. His eyes were wide open in terror; he moaned, feebly recognizing the voice. The next sound that was heard was the sound made by the removal of the ladder from the balcony. Turlington, having descended by it, had taken it away. Natalie had but too accurately guessed what would happen. The death of the villain's accomplice had freed him from all apprehension in that quarter. He had deliberately dogged Launce's steps, and had deliberately allowed him to put himself in the wrong by effecting a secret entrance into the house.

There was an interval--a horrible interval--and then they heard the front door opened. Without stopping (judging by the absence of sound) to close it again, Turlington rapidly ascended the stairs and tried the locked door.

"Come out, and give yourself up!" he called through the door. "I have got my revolver with me, and I have a right to fire on a man who has broken into my house. If the door isn't opened before I count three, your blood be on your own head. One!"

Launce was armed with nothing but his stick. He advanced, without an instant's hesitation, to give himself up. Natalie threw her arms round him and clasped him fast before he could reach the door.

"Two!" cried the voice outside, as Launce struggled to force her from him. At the same moment his eye turned toward the bed. It was exactly opposite the door--it was straight in the line of fire! Sir Joseph's life (as Turlington had deliberately calculated) was actually in greater danger than Launce's life. He tore himself free, rushed to the bed, and took the old man in his arms to lift him out.

"Three!"

The crash of the report sounded. The bullet came through the door, grazed Launce's left arm, and buried itself in the pillow, at the very place on which Sir Joseph's head had rested the moment before. Launce had saved his father-in-law's life. Turlington had fired his first shot for the money, and had not got it yet.

They were safe in the corner of the room, on the same side as the door--Sir Joseph, helpless as a child, in Launce's arms; the women pale, but admirably calm. They were safe for the moment, when the second bullet (fired at an angle) tore its way through the wall on their right hand.

"I hear you," cried the voice of the miscreant on the other side of the door. "I'll have you yet--through the wall."

There was a pause. They heard his hand sounding the wall, to find out where there was solid wood in the material of which it was built, and where there was plaster only. At that dreadful moment Launce's composure never left him. He laid Sir Joseph softly on the floor, and signed to Natalie and her aunt to lie down by him in silence. Their lives depended now on neither their voices nor their movements telling the murderer where to fire. He chose his place. The barrel of the revolver grated as he laid it against the wall. He touched the hair trigger. A faint click was the only sound that followed. The third barrel had missed fire.

They heard him ask himself, with an oath, "What's wrong with it now?"

There was a pause of silence.

Was he examining the weapon?

Before they could ask themselves the question, the report of the exploding charge burst on their ears. It was instantly followed by a heavy fall. They looked at the opposite wall of the room. No sign of a bullet there or anywhere.

Launce signed to them not to move yet. They waited, and listened. Nothing stirred on the landing outside.

Suddenly there was a disturbance of the silence in the lower regions--a clamor of many voices at the open house door. Had the firing of the revolver been heard at the vicarage? Yes! They recognized the vicar's voice among the others. A moment more, and they heard a general exclamation of horror on the stairs. Launce opened the door of the room. He instantly closed it again before Natalie could follow him.

The dead body of Turlington lay on the landing outside. The charge in the fourth barrel of the revolver had exploded while he was looking at it. The bullet had entered his mouth and killed him on the spot.

DOCUMENTARY HINTS, IN CONCLUSION.

First Hint.

(Derived from Lady Winwood's Card-Rack.)

"Sir Joseph Graybrooke and Miss Graybrooke request the honor of Lord and Lady Winwood's company to dinner, on Wednesday, February 10, at half-past seven o'clock. To meet Mr. and Mrs. Launcelot Linzie on their return."

Second Hint.

(Derived from a recent Money Article in morning Newspaper.)

"We are requested to give the fullest contradiction to unfavorable rumors lately in circulation respecting the firm of Pizzituti, Turlington, and Branca. Some temporary derangement in the machinery of the business was undoubtedly produced in consequence of the sudden death of the lamented managing partner, Mr. Turlington, by the accidental discharge of a revolver which he was examining. Whatever temporary obstacles may have existed are now overcome. We are informed, on good authority, that the well-known house of Messrs. Bulpit Brothers has an interest in the business, and will carry it on until further notice."