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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[Man and Wife](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 25 - Forward

BLANCHE found her lover as attentive as usual to her slightest wish, but not in his customary good spirits. He pleaded fatigue, after his long watch at the cross-roads, as an excuse for his depression. As long as there was any hope of a reconciliation with Geoffrey, he was unwilling to tell Blanche what had happened that afternoon. The hope grew fainter and fainter as the evening advanced. Arnold purposely suggested a visit to the billiard-room, and joined the game, with Blanche, to give Geoffrey an opportunity of saying the few gracious words which would have made them friends again. Geoffrey never spoke the words; he obstinately ignored Arnold's presence in the room.

At the card-table the whist went on interminably. Lady Lundie, Sir Patrick, and the surgeon, were all inveterate players, evenly matched. Smith and Jones (joining the game alternately) were aids to whist, exactly as they were aids to conversation. The same safe and modest mediocrity of style distinguished the proceedings of these two gentlemen in all the affairs of life.

The time wore on to midnight. They went to bed late and they rose late at Windygates House. Under that hospitable roof, no intrusive hints, in the shape of flat candlesticks exhibiting themselves with ostentatious virtue on side-tables, hurried the guest to his room; no vile bell rang him ruthlessly out of bed the next morning, and insisted on his breakfasting at a given hour. Life has surely hardships enough that are inevitable without gratuitously adding the hardship of absolute government, administered by a clock?

It was a quarter past twelve when Lady Lundie rose blandly from the whist-table, and said that she supposed somebody must set the example of going to bed. Sir Patrick and Smith, the surgeon and Jones, agreed on a last rubber. Blanche vanished while her stepmother's eye was on her; and appeared again in the drawing-room, when Lady Lundie was safe in the hands of her maid. Nobody followed the example of the mistress of the house but Arnold. He left the billiard-room with the certainty that it was all over now between Geoffrey and himself. Not even the attraction of Blanche proved strong enough to detain him that night. He went his way to bed.

It was past one o'clock. The final rubber was at an end, the accounts were settled at the card-table; the surgeon had strolled into the billiard-room, and Smith and Jones had followed him, when Duncan came in, at last, with the telegram in his hand.

Blanche turned from the broad, calm autumn moonlight which had drawn her to the window, and looked over her uncle's shoulder while he opened the telegram.

She read the first line--and that was enough. The whole scaffolding of hope built round that morsel of paper fell to the ground in an instant. The train from Kirkandrew had reached Edinburgh at the usual time. Every passenger in it had passed under the eyes of the police, and nothing had been seen of any person who answered the description given of Anne!

Sir Patrick pointed to the two last sentences in the telegram: "Inquiries telegraphed to Falkirk. If with any result, you shall know."

"We must hope for the best, Blanche. They evidently suspect her of having got out at the junction of the two railways for the purpose of giving the telegraph the slip. There is no help for it. Go to bed, child--go to bed."

Blanche kissed her uncle in silence and went away. The bright young face was sad with the first hopeless sorrow which the old man had yet seen in it. His niece's parting look dwelt painfully on his mind when he was up in his room, with the faithful Duncan getting him ready for his bed.

"This is a bad business, Duncan. I don't like to say so to Miss Lundie; but I greatly fear the governess has baffled us."

"It seems likely, Sir Patrick. The poor young lady looks quite heart-broken about it."

"You noticed that too, did you? She has lived all her life, you see, with Miss Silvester; and there is a very strong attachment between them. I am uneasy about my niece, Duncan. I am afraid this disappointment will have a serious effect on her."

"She's young, Sir Patrick."

"Yes, my friend, she's young; but the young (when they are good for any thing) have warm hearts. Winter hasn't stolen on _them_, Duncan! And they feel keenly."

"I think there's reason to hope, Sir, that Miss Lundie may get over it more easily than you suppose."

"What reason, pray?"

"A person in my position can hardly venture to speak freely, Sir, on a delicate matter of this kind."

Sir Patrick's temper flashed out, half-seriously, half-whimsically, as usual.

"Is that a snap at Me, you old dog? If I am not your friend, as well as your master, who is? Am _I_ in the habit of keeping any of my harmless fellow-creatures at a distance? I despise the cant of modern Liberalism; but it's not the less true that I have, all my life, protested against the inhuman separation of classes in England. We are, in that respect, brag as we may of our national virtue, the most unchristian people in the civilized world."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Patrick--"

"God help me! I'm talking politics at this time of night! It's your fault, Duncan. What do you mean by casting my station in my teeth, because I can't put my night-cap on comfortably till you have brushed my hair? I have a good mind to get up and brush yours. There! there! I'm uneasy about my niece--nervous irritability, my good fellow, that's all. Let's hear what you have to say about Miss Lundie. And go on with my hair. And don't be a humbug."

"I was about to remind you, Sir Patrick, that Miss Lundie has another interest in her life to turn to. If this matter of Miss Silvester ends badly--and I own it begins to look as if it would--I should hurry my niece's marriage, Sir, and see if _that_ wouldn't console her."

Sir Patrick started under the gentle discipline of the hair-brush in Duncan's hand.

"That's very sensibly put," said the old gentleman. "Duncan! you are, what I call, a clear-minded man. Well worth thinking of, old Truepenny! If the worst comes to the worst, well worth thinking of!"

It was not the first time that Duncan's steady good sense had struck light, under the form of a new thought, in his master's mind. But never yet had he wrought such mischief as the mischief which he had innocently done now. He had sent Sir Patrick to bed with the fatal idea of hastening the marriage of Arnold and Blanche.

The situation of affairs at Windygates--now that Anne had apparently obliterated all trace of herself--was becoming serious. The one chance on which the discovery of Arnold's position depended, was the chance that accident might reveal the truth in the lapse of time. In this posture of circumstances, Sir Patrick now resolved--if nothing happened to relieve Blanche's anxiety in the course of the week--to advance the celebration of the marriage from the end of the autumn (as originally contemplated) to the first fortnight of the ensuing month. As dates then stood, the change led (so far as free scope for the development of accident was concerned) to this serious result. It abridged a lapse of three months into an interval of three weeks.

The next morning came; and Blanche marked it as a memorable morning, by committing an act of imprudence, which struck away one more of the chances of discovery that had existed, before the arrival of the Edinburgh telegram on the previous day.

She had passed a sleepless night; fevered in mind and body; thinking, hour after hour, of nothing but Anne. At sunrise she could endure it no longer. Her power to control herself was completely exhausted; her own impulses led her as they pleased. She got up, determined not to let Geoffrey leave the house without risking an effort to make him reveal what he knew about Anne. It was nothing less than downright treason to Sir Patrick to act on her own responsibility in this way. She knew it was wrong; she was heartily ashamed of herself for doing it. But the demon that possesses women with a recklessness all their own, at the critical moments of their lives, had got her--and she did it.

Geoffrey had arranged overnight, to breakfast early, by himself, and to walk the ten miles to his brother's house; sending a servant to fetch his luggage later in the day.

He had got on his hat; he was standing in the hall, searching his pocket for his second self, the pipe--when Blanche suddenly appeared from the morning-room, and placed herself between him and the house door.

"Up early--eh?" said Geoffrey. "I'm off to my brother's."

She made no reply. He looked at her closer. The girl's eyes were trying to read his face, with an utter carelessness of concealment, which forbade (even to his mind) all unworthy interpretation of her motive for stopping him on his way out

"Any commands for me?" he inquired

This time she answered him. "I have something to ask you," she said.

He smiled graciously, and opened his tobacco-pouch. He was fresh and strong after his night's sleep--healthy and handsome and good-humored. The house-maids had had a peep at him that morning, and had wished--like Desdemona, with a difference--that "Heaven had made all three of them such a man."

"Well," he said, "what is it?"

She put her question, without a single word of preface--purposely to surprise him.

"Mr. Delamayn," she said, "do you know where Anne Silvester is this morning?"

He was filling his pipe as she spoke, and he dropped some of the tobacco on the floor. Instead of answering before he picked up the tobacco he answered after--in surly self-possession, and in one word--"No."

"Do you know nothing about her?"

He devoted himself doggedly to the filling of his pipe. "Nothing."

"On your word of honor, as a gentleman?"

"On my word of honor, as a gentleman."

He put back his tobacco-pouch in his pocket. His handsome face was as hard as stone. His clear blue eyes defied all the girls in England put together to see into _his_ mind. "Have you done, Miss Lundie?" he asked, suddenly changing to a bantering politeness of tone and manner.

Blanche saw that it was hopeless--saw that she had compromised her own interests by her own headlong act. Sir Patrick's warning words came back reproachfully to her now when it was too late. "We commit a serious mistake if we put him on his guard at starting."

There was but one course to take now. "Yes," she said. "I have done."

"My turn now," rejoined Geoffrey. "You want to know where Miss Silvester is. Why do you ask Me?"

Blanche did all that could be done toward repairing the error that she had committed. She kept Geoffrey as far away as Geoffrey had kept _her_ from the truth.

"I happen to know," she replied "that Miss Silvester left the place at which she had been staying about the time when you went out walking yesterday. And I thought you might have seen her."

"Oh? That's the reason--is it?" said Geoffrey, with a smile.

The smile stung Blanche's sensitive temper to the quick. She made a final effort to control herself, before her indignation got the better of her.

"I have no more to say, Mr. Delamayn." With that reply she turned her back on him, and closed the door of the morning-room between them.

Geoffrey descended the house steps and lit his pipe. He was not at the slightest loss, on this occasion, to account for what had happened. He assumed at once that Arnold had taken a mean revenge on him after his conduct of the day before, and had told the whole secret of his errand at Craig Fernie to Blanche. The thing would get next, no doubt, to Sir Patrick's ears; and Sir Patrick would thereupon be probably the first person who revealed to Arnold the position in which he had placed himself with Anne. All right! Sir Patrick would be an excellent witness to appeal to, when the scandal broke out, and when the time came for repudiating Anne's claim on him as the barefaced imposture of a woman who was married already to another man. He puffed away unconcernedly at his pipe, and started, at his swinging, steady pace, for his brother's house.

Blanche remained alone in the morning-room. The prospect of getting at the truth, by means of what Geoffrey might say on the next occasion when he consulted Sir Patrick, was a prospect that she herself had closed from that moment. She sat down in despair by the window. It commanded a view of the little side-terrace which had been Anne's favorite walk at Windygates. With weary eyes and aching heart the poor child looked at the familiar place; and asked herself, with the bitter repentance that comes too late, if she had destroyed the last chance of finding Anne!

She sat passively at the window, while the hours of the morning wore on, until the postman came. Before the servant could take the letter bag she was in the hall to receive it. Was it possible to hope that the bag had brought tidings of Anne? She sorted the letters; and lighted suddenly on a letter to herself. It bore the Kirkcaldy postmark, and it was addressed to her in Anne's handwriting.

She tore the letter open, and read these lines:

"I have left you forever, Blanche. God bless and reward you! God make you a happy woman in all your life to come! Cruel as you will think me, love, I have never been so truly your sister as I am now. I can only tell you this--I can never tell you more. Forgive me, and forget me, our lives are parted lives from this day."

Going down to breakfast about his usual hour, Sir Patrick missed Blanche, whom he was accustomed to see waiting for him at the table at that time. The room was empty; the other members of the household having all finished their morning meal. Sir Patrick disliked breakfasting alone. He sent Duncan with a message, to be given to Blanche's maid.

The maid appeared in due time Miss Lundie was unable to leave her room. She sent a letter to her uncle, with her love--and begged he would read it.

Sir Patrick opened the letter and saw what Anne had written to Blanche.

He waited a little, reflecting, with evident pain and anxiety, on what he had read--then opened his own letters, and hurriedly looked at the signatures. There was nothing for him from his friend, the sheriff, at Edinburgh, and no communication from the railway, in the shape of a telegram. He had decided, overnight, on waiting till the end of the week before he interfered in the matter of Blanche's marriage. The events of the morning determined him on not waiting another day. Duncan returned to the breakfast-room to pour out his master's coffee. Sir Patrick sent him away again with a second message

"Do you know where Lady Lundie is, Duncan?"

"Yes, Sir Patrick."

"My compliments to her ladyship. If she is not otherwise engaged, I shall be glad to speak to her privately in an hour's time."