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

[Man and Wife](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

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

Chapter 26 - Dropped

SIR PATRICK made a bad breakfast. Blanche's absence fretted him, and Anne Silvester's letter puzzled him.

He read it, short as it was, a second time, and a third. If it meant any thing, it meant that the motive at the bottom of Anne's flight was to accomplish the sacrifice of herself to the happiness of Blanche. She had parted for life from his niece for his niece's sake! What did this mean? And how was it to be reconciled with Anne's position--as described to him by Mrs. Inchbore during his visit to Craig Fernie?

All Sir Patrick's ingenuity, and all Sir Patrick's experience, failed to find so much as the shadow of an answer to that question.

While he was still pondering over the letter, Arnold and the surgeon entered the breakfast-room together.

"Have you heard about Blanche?" asked Arnold, excitedly. "She is in no danger, Sir Patrick--the worst of it is over now."

The surgeon interposed before Sir Patrick could appeal to him.

"Mr. Brinkworth's interest in the young lady a little exaggerates the state of the case," he said. "I have seen her, at Lady Lundie's request; and I can assure you that there is not the slightest reason for any present alarm. Miss Lundie has had a nervous attack, which has yielded to the simplest domestic remedies. The only anxiety you need feel is connected with the management of her in the future. She is suffering from some mental distress, which it is not for me, but for her friends, to alleviate and remove. If you can turn her thoughts from the painful subject--whatever it may be--on which they are dwelling now, you will do all that needs to be done." He took up a newspaper from the table, and strolled out into the garden, leaving Sir Patrick and Arnold together.

"You heard that?" said Sir Patrick.

"Is he right, do you think?" asked Arnold.

"Right? Do you suppose a man gets his reputation by making mistakes? You're one of the new generation, Master Arnold. You can all of you stare at a famous man; but you haven't an atom of respect for his fame. If Shakspeare came to life again, and talked of playwriting, the first pretentious nobody who sat opposite at dinner would differ with him as composedly as he might differ with you and me. Veneration is dead among us; the present age has buried it, without a stone to mark the place. So much for that! Let's get back to Blanche. I suppose you can guess what the painful subject is that's dwelling on her mind? Miss Silvester has baffled me, and baffled the Edinburgh police. Blanche discovered that we had failed last night and Blanche received that letter this morning."

He pushed Anne's letter across the breakfast-table.

Arnold read it, and handed it back without a word. Viewed by the new light in which he saw Geoffrey's character after the quarrel on the heath, the letter conveyed but one conclusion to his mind. Geoffrey had deserted her.

"Well?" said Sir Patrick. "Do you understand what it means?"

"I understand Blanche's wretchedness when she read it."

He said no more than that. It was plain that no information which he could afford--even if he had considered himself at liberty to give it--would be of the slightest use in assisting Sir Patrick to trace Miss Silvester, under present circumstances. There was--unhappily--no temptation to induce him to break the honorable silence which he had maintained thus far. And--more unfortunately still--assuming the temptation to present itself, Arnold's capacity to resist it had never been so strong a capacity as it was now.

To the two powerful motives which had hitherto tied his tongue--respect for Anne's reputation, and reluctance to reveal to Blanche the deception which he had been compelled to practice on her at the inn--to these two motives there was now added a third. The meanness of betraying the confidence which Geoffrey had reposed in him would be doubled meanness if he proved false to his trust after Geoffrey had personally insulted him. The paltry revenge which that false friend had unhesitatingly suspected him of taking was a revenge of which Arnold's nature was simply incapable. Never had his lips been more effectually sealed than at this moment--when his whole future depended on Sir Patrick's discovering the part that he had played in past events at Craig Fernie.

"Yes! yes!" resumed Sir Patrick, impatiently. "Blanche's distress is intelligible enough. But here is my niece apparently answerable for this unhappy woman's disappearance. Can you explain what my niece has got to do with it?"

"! Blanche herself is completely mystified. How should I know?"

Answering in those terms, he spoke with perfect sincerity. Anne's vague distrust of the position in which they had innocently placed themselves at the inn had produced no corresponding effect on Arnold at the time. He had not regarded it; he had not even understood it. As a necessary result, not the faintest suspicion of the motive under which Anne was acting existed in his mind now.

Sir Patrick put the letter into his pocket-book, and abandoned all further attempt at interpreting the meaning of it in despair.

"Enough, and more than enough, of groping in the dark," he said. "One point is clear to me after what has happened up stairs this morning. We must accept the position in which Miss Silvester has placed us. I shall give up all further effort to trace her from this moment."

"Surely that will be a dreadful disappointment to Blanche, Sir Patrick?"

"I don't deny it. We must face that result."

"If you are sure there is nothing else to be done, I suppose we must."

"I am not sure of any thing of the sort, Master Arnold! There are two chances still left of throwing light on this matter, which are both of them independent of any thing that Miss Silvester can do to keep it in the dark."

"Then why not try them, Sir? It seems hard to drop Miss Silvester when she is in trouble."

"We can't help her against her own will," rejoined Sir Patrick. "And we can't run the risk, after that nervous attack this morning, of subjecting Blanche to any further suspense. I have thought of my niece's interests throughout this business; and if I now change my mind, and decline to agitate her by more experiments, ending (quite possibly) in more failures, it is because I am thinking of her interests still. I have no other motive. However numerous my weaknesses may be, ambition to distinguish myself as a detective policeman is not one of them. The case, from the police point of view, is by no means a lost case. I drop it, nevertheless, for Blanche's sake. Instead of encouraging her thoughts to dwell on this melancholy business, we must apply the remedy suggested by our medical friend."

"How is that to be done?" asked Arnold.

The sly twist of humor began to show itself in Sir Patrick's face.

"Has she nothing to think of in the future, which is a pleasanter subject of reflection than the loss of her friend?" he asked. "You are interested, my young gentleman, in the remedy that is to cure Blanche. You are one of the drugs in the moral prescription. Can you guess what it is?"

Arnold started to his feet, and brightened into a new being.

"Perhaps you object to be hurried?" said Sir Patrick.

"Object! If Blanche will only consent, I'll take her to church as soon as she comes down stairs!"

"Thank you!" said Sir Patrick, dryly. "Mr. Arnold Brinkworth, may you always be as ready to take Time by the forelock as you are now! Sit down again; and don't talk nonsense. It is just possible--if Blanche consents (as you say), and if we can hurry the lawyers--that you may be married in three weeks' or a month's time."

"What have the lawyers got to do with it?"

"My good fellow, this is not a marriage in a novel! This is the most unromantic affair of the sort that ever happened. Here are a young gentleman and a young lady, both rich people; both well matched in birth and character; one of age, and the other marrying with the full consent and approval of her guardian. What is the consequence of this purely prosaic state of things? Lawyers and settlements, of course!"

"Come into the library, Sir Patrick; and I'll soon settle the settlements! A bit of paper, and a dip of ink. 'I hereby give every blessed farthing I have got in the world to my dear Blanche.' Sign that; stick a wafer on at the side; clap your finger on the wafer; 'I deliver this as my act and deed;' and there it is--done!"

"Is it, really? You are a born legislator. You create and codify your own system all in a breath. Moses-Justinian-Mahomet, give me your arm! There is one atom of sense in what you have just said. 'Come into the library'--is a suggestion worth attending to. Do you happen, among your other superfluities, to have such a thing as a lawyer about you?"

"I have got two. One in London, and one in Edinburgh."

"We will take the nearest of the two, because we are in a hurry. Who is the Edinburgh lawyer? Pringle of Pitt Street? Couldn't be a better man. Come and write to him. You have given me your abstract of a marriage settlement with the brevity of an ancient Roman. I scorn to be outdone by an amateur lawyer. Here is my abstract: You are just and generous to Blanche; Blanche is just and generous to you; and you both combine to be just and generous together to your children. There is a model settlement! and there are your instructions to Pringle of Pitt Street! Can you do it by yourself? No; of course you can't. Now don't be slovenly-minded! See the points in their order as they come. You are going to be married; you state to whom, you add that I am the lady's guardian; you give the name and address of my lawyer in Edinburgh; you write your instructions plainly in the fewest words, and leave details to your legal adviser; you refer the lawyers to each other; you request that the draft settlements be prepared as speedily as possible, and you give your address at this house. There are the heads. Can't you do it now? Oh, the rising generation! Oh, the progress we are making in these enlightened modern times! There! there! you can marry Blanche, and make her happy, and increase the population--and all without knowing how to write the English language. One can only say with the learned Bevorskius, looking out of his window at the illimitable loves of the sparrows, 'How merciful is Heaven to its creatures!' Take up the pen. I'll dictate! I'll dictate!"

Sir Patrick read the letter over, approved of it, and saw it safe in the box for the post. This done, he peremptorily forbade Arnold to speak to his niece on the subject of the marriage without his express permission. "There's somebody else's consent to be got," he said, "besides Blanche's consent and mine."

"Lady Lundie?"

"Lady Lundie. Strictly speaking, I am the only authority. But my sister-in-law is Blanche's step-mother, and she is appointed guardian in the event of my death. She has a right to be consulted--in courtesy, if not in law. Would you like to do it?"

Arnold's face fell. He looked at Sir Patrick in silent dismay.

"What! you can't even speak to such a perfectly pliable person as Lady Lundie? You may have been a very useful fellow at sea. A more helpless young man I never met with on shore. Get out with you into the garden among the other sparrows! Somebody must confront her ladyship. And if you won't--I must."

He pushed Arnold out of the library, and applied meditatively to the knob of his cane. His gayety disappeared, now that he was alone. His experience of Lady Lundie's character told him that, in attempting to win her approval to any scheme for hurrying Blanche's marriage, he was undertaking no easy task. "I suppose," mused Sir Patrick, thinking of his late brother--"I suppose poor Tom had some way of managing her. How did he do it, I wonder? If she had been the wife of a bricklayer, she is the sort of woman who would have been kept in perfect order by a vigorous and regular application of her husband's fist. But Tom wasn't a bricklayer. I wonder how Tom did it?" After a little hard thinking on this point Sir Patrick gave up the problem as beyond human solution. "It must be done," he concluded. "And my own mother-wit must help me to do it."

In that resigned frame of mind he knocked at the door of Lady Lundie's boudoir.