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## Chapter 13 - Blanche

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MRS. INCHBARE was the first person who acted in the emergency. She called for lights; and sternly rebuked the house-maid, who brought them, for not having closed the house door. "Ye feckless ne'er-do-weel!" cried the landlady; "the wind's blawn the candles out."

The woman declared (with perfect truth) that the door had been closed. An awkward dispute might have ensued if Blanche had not diverted Mrs. Inchbare's attention to herself. The appearance of the lights disclosed her, wet through with her arms round Anne's neck. Mrs. Inchbare digressed at once to the pressing question of changing the young lady's clothes, and gave Anne the opportunity of looking round her, unobserved. Arnold had made his escape before the candles had been brought in.

In the mean time Blanche's attention was absorbed in her own dripping skirts.

"Good gracious! I'm absolutely distilling rain from every part of me. And I'm making you, Anne, as wet as I am! Lend me some dry things. You can't? Mrs. Inchbare, what does your experience suggest? Which had I better do? Go to bed while my clothes are being dried? or borrow from your wardrobe--though you \_are\_ a head and shoulders taller than I am?"

Mrs. Inchbare instantly bustled out to fetch the choicest garments that her wardrobe could produce. The moment the door had closed on her Blanche looked round the room in her turn.

The rights of affection having been already asserted, the claims of curiosity naturally pressed for satisfaction next.

"Somebody passed me in the dark," she whispered. "Was it your husband? I'm dying to be introduced to him. And, oh my dear! what \_is\_ your married name?"

Anne answered, coldly, "Wait a little. I can't speak about it yet."

"Are you ill?" asked Blanche.

"I am a little nervous."

"Has any thing unpleasant happened between you and my uncle? You have seen him, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Did he give you my message?"

"He gave me your message.--Blanche! you promised him to stay at Windygates. Why, in the name of heaven, did you come here to-night?"

"If you were half as fond of me as I am of you," returned Blanche, "you wouldn't ask that. I tried hard to keep my promise, but I couldn't do it. It was all very well, while my uncle was laying down the law--with Lady Lundie in a rage, and the dogs barking, and the doors banging, and all that. The excitement kept me up. But when my uncle had gone, and the dreadful gray, quiet, rainy evening came, and it had all calmed down again, there was no bearing it. The house--without you--was like a tomb. If I had had Arnold with me I might have done very well. But I was all by myself. Think of that! Not a soul to speak to! There wasn't a horrible thing that could possibly happen to you that I didn't fancy was going to happen. I went into your empty room and looked at your things. \_That\_ settled it, my darling! I rushed down stairs--carried away, positively carried away, by an impulse beyond human resistance. How could I help it? I ask any reasonable person how could I help it? I ran to the stables and found Jacob. Impulse--all impulse! I said, 'Get the pony-chaise--I must have a drive--I don't care if it rains--you come with me.' All in a breath, and all impulse! Jacob behaved like an angel. He said, 'All right, miss.' I am perfectly certain Jacob would die for me if I asked him. He is drinking hot grog at this moment, to prevent him from catching cold, by my express orders. He had the pony-chaise out in two minutes; and off we went. Lady Lundie, my dear, prostrate in her own room--too much sal volatile. I hate her. The rain got worse. I didn't mind it. Jacob didn't mind it. The pony didn't mind it. They had both caught my impulse--especially the pony. It didn't come on to thunder till some time afterward; and then we were nearer Craig Fernie than Windygates--to say nothing of your being at one place and not at the other. The lightning was quite awful on the moor. If I had had one of the horses, he would have been frightened. The pony shook his darling little head, and dashed through it. He is to have beer. A mash with beer in it--by my express orders. When he has done we'll borrow a lantern, and go into the stable, and kiss him. In the mean time, my dear, here I am--wet through in a thunderstorm, which doesn't in the least matter--and determined to satisfy my own mind about you, which matters a great deal, and must and shall be done before I rest to-night! "

She turned Anne, by main force, as she spoke, toward the light of the candles.

Her tone changed the moment she looked at Anne's face.

"I knew it!" she said. "You would never have kept the most interesting event in your life a secret from \_me\_--you would never have written me such a cold formal letter as the letter you left in your room--if there had not been something wrong. I said so at the time. I know it now! Why has your husband forced you to leave Windygates at a moment's notice? Why does he slip out of the room in the dark, as if he was afraid of being seen? Anne! Anne! what has come to you? Why do you receive me in this way?"

At that critical moment Mrs. Inchbare reappeared, with the choicest selection of wearing apparel which her wardrobe could furnish. Anne hailed the welcome interruption. She took the candles, and led the way into the bedroom immediately.

"Change your wet clothes first," she said. "We can talk after that."

The bedroom door had hardly been closed a minute before there was a tap at it. Signing to Mrs. Inchbare not to interrupt the services she was rendering to Blanche, Anne passed quickly into the sitting-room, and closed the door behind her. To her infinite relief, she only found herself face to face with the discreet Mr. Bishopriggs.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The eye of Mr. Bishopriggs announced, by a wink, that his mission was of a confidential nature. The hand of Mr. Bishopriggs wavered; the breath of Mr. Bishopriggs exhaled a spirituous fume. He slowly produced a slip of paper, with some lines of writing on it.

"From ye ken who," he explained, jocosely. "A bit love-letter, I trow, from him that's dear to ye. Eh! he's an awfu' reprobate is him that's dear to ye. Miss, in the bedchamber there, will nae doot be the one he's jilted for \_you?\_ I see it all--ye can't blind Me--I ha' been a frail person my ain self, in my time. Hech! he's safe and sound, is the reprobate. I ha' lookit after a' his little creature-comforts--I'm joost a fether to him, as well as a fether to you. Trust Bishopriggs--when puir human nature wants a bit pat on the back, trust Bishopriggs."

While the sage was speaking these comfortable words, Anne was reading the lines traced on the paper. They were signed by Arnold; and they ran thus:

"I am in the smoking-room of the inn. It rests with you to say whether I must stop there. I don't believe Blanche would be jealous. If I knew how to explain my being at the inn without betraying the confidence which you and Geoffrey have placed in me, I wouldn't be away from her another moment. It does grate on me so! At the same time, I don't want to make your position harder than it is. Think of yourself first. I leave it in your hands. You have only to say, Wait, by the bearer--and I shall understand that I am to stay where I am till I hear from you again."

Anne looked up from the message.

"Ask him to wait," she said; "and I will send word to him again."

"Wi' mony loves and kisses," suggested Mr. Bishopriggs, as a necessary supplement to the message. "Eh! it comes as easy as A. B. C. to a man o' my experience. Ye can ha' nae better gae-between than yer puir servant to command, Sawmuel Bishopriggs. I understand ye baith pairfeckly." He laid his forefinger along his flaming nose, and withdrew.

Without allowing herself to hesitate for an instant, Anne opened the bedroom door--with the resolution of relieving Arnold from the new sacrifice imposed on him by owning the truth.

"Is that you?" asked Blanche.

At the sound of her voice, Anne started back guiltily. "I'll be with you in a moment," she answered, and closed the door again between them.

No! it was not to be done. Something in Blanche's trivial question--or something, perhaps, in the sight of Blanche's face--roused the warning instinct in Anne, which silenced her on the very brink of the disclosure. At the last moment the iron chain of circumstances made itself felt, binding her without mercy to the hateful, the degrading, the deceit. Could she own the truth, about Geoffrey and herself, to Blanche? and, without owning it, could she explain and justify Arnold's conduct in joining her privately at Craig Fernie? A shameful confession made to an innocent girl; a risk of fatally shaking Arnold's place in Blanche's estimation; a scandal at the inn, in the disgrace of which the others would be involved with herself--this was the price at which she must speak, if she followed her first impulse, and said, in so many words, "Arnold is here."

It was not to be thought of. Cost what it might in present wretchedness--end how it might, if the deception was discovered in the future--Blanche must be kept in ignorance of the truth, Arnold must be kept in hiding until she had gone.

Anne opened the door for the second time, and went in.

The business of the toilet was standing still. Blanche was in confidential communication with Mrs. Inchbore. At the moment when Anne entered the room she was eagerly questioning the landlady about her friend's "invisible husband"--she was just saying, "Do tell me! what is he like?"

The capacity for accurate observation is a capacity so uncommon, and is so seldom associated, even where it does exist, with the equally rare gift of accurately describing the thing or the person observed, that Anne's dread of the consequences if Mrs. Inchbore was allowed time to comply with Blanches request, was, in all probability, a dread misplaced. Right or wrong, however, the alarm that she felt hurried her into taking measures for dismissing the landlady on the spot. "We mustn't keep you from your occupations any longer," she said to Mrs. Inchbore. "I will give Miss Lundie all the help she needs."

Barred from advancing in one direction, Blanche's curiosity turned back, and tried in another. She boldly addressed herself to Anne.

"I \_must\_ know something about him," she said. "Is he shy before strangers? I heard you whispering with him on the other side of the door. Are you jealous, Anne? Are you afraid I shall fascinate him in this dress?"

Blanche, in Mrs. Inchbore's best gown--an ancient and high-waisted silk garment, of the hue called "bottle-green," pinned up in front, and trailing far behind her--with a short, orange-colored shawl over her shoulders, and a towel tied turban fashion round her head, to dry her wet hair, looked at once the strangest and the prettiest human anomaly that ever was seen. "For heaven's sake," she said, gayly, "don't tell your husband I am in Mrs. Inchbore's clothes! I want to appear suddenly, without a word to warn him of what a figure I am! I should have nothing left to wish for in this world," she added, "if Arnold could only see me now!"

Looking in the glass, she noticed Anne's face reflected behind her, and started at the sight of it.

"What \_is\_ the matter?" she asked. "Your face frightens me."

It was useless to prolong the pain of the inevitable misunderstanding between them. The one course to take was to silence all further inquiries then and there. Strongly as she felt this, Anne's inbred loyalty to Blanche still shrank from deceiving her to her face. "I might write it," she thought. "I can't say it, with Arnold Brinkworth in the same house with her! Write it? As she reconsidered the word, a sudden idea struck her. She opened the bedroom door, and led the way back into the sitting-room.

"Gone again!" exclaimed Blanche, looking uneasily round the empty room. "Anne! there's something so strange in all this, that I neither can, nor will, put up with your silence any longer. It's not just, it's not kind, to shut me out of your confidence, after we have lived together like sisters all our lives!"

Anne sighed bitterly, and kissed her on the forehead. "You shall know all I can tell you--all I \_dare\_ tell you," she said, gently. "Don't reproach me. It hurts me more than you think."

She turned away to the side table, and came back with a letter in her hand. "Read that," she said, and handed it to Blanche.

Blanche saw her own name, on the address, in the handwriting of Anne.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

"I wrote to you, after Sir Patrick had left me," Anne replied. "I meant you to have received my letter to-morrow, in time to prevent any little imprudence into which your anxiety might hurry you. All that I \_can\_ say to you is said there. Spare me the distress of speaking. Read it, Blanche."

Blanche still held the letter, unopened.

"A letter from you to me! when we are both together, and both alone in the same room! It's worse than formal, Anne! It's as if there was a quarrel between us. Why should it distress you to speak to me?"

Anne's eyes dropped to the ground. She pointed to the letter for the second time.

Blanche broke the seal.

She passed rapidly over the opening sentences, and devoted all her attention to the second paragraph.

"And now, my love, you will expect me to atone for the surprise and distress that I have caused you, by explaining what my situation really is, and by telling you all my plans for the future. Dearest Blanche! don't think me untrue to the affection we bear toward each other--don't think there is any change in my heart toward you--believe only that I am a very unhappy woman, and that I am in a position which forces me, against my own will, to be silent about myself. Silent even to you, the sister of my love--the one person in the world who is dearest to me! A time may come when I shall be able to open my heart to you. Oh, what good it will do me! what a relief it will be! For the present, I must be silent. For the present, we must be parted. God knows what it costs me to write this. I think of the dear old days that are gone; I remember how I promised your mother to be a sister to you, when her kind eyes looked at me, for the last time--\_your\_ mother, who was an angel from heaven to \_ mine!\_ All this comes back on me now, and breaks my heart. But it must be! my own Blanche, for the present. it must be! I will write often--I will think of you, my darling, night and day, till a happier future unites us again. God bless \_you,\_ my dear one! And God help \_ me!\_"

Blanche silently crossed the room to the sofa on which Anne was sitting, and stood there for a moment, looking at her. She sat down, and laid her head on Anne's shoulder. Sorrowfully and quietly, she put the letter into her bosom--and took Anne's hand, and kissed it.

"All my questions are answered, dear. I will wait your time."

It was simply, sweetly, generously said.

Anne burst into tears.

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The rain still fell, but the storm was dying away.

Blanche left the sofa, and, going to the window, opened the shutters to look out at the night. She suddenly came back to Anne.

"I see lights," she said--"the lights of a carriage coming up out of the darkness of the moor. They are sending after me, from Windygates. Go into the bedroom. It's just possible Lady Lundie may have come for me herself."

The ordinary relations of the two toward each other were completely reversed. Anne was like a child in Blanche's hands. She rose, and withdrew.

Left alone, Blanche took the letter out of her bosom, and read it again, in the interval of waiting for the carriage.

The second reading confirmed her in a resolution which she had privately taken, while she had been sitting by Anne on the sofa--a resolution destined to lead to far more serious results in the future than any provisions of hers could anticipate. Sir Patrick was the one person she knew on whose discretion and experience she could implicitly rely. She determined, in Anne's own interests, to take her uncle into her confidence, and to tell him all that had happened at the inn "I'll first make him forgive me," thought Blanche. "And then I'll see if he thinks as I do, when I tell him about Anne."

The carriage drew up at the door; and Mrs. Inchbore showed in--not Lady Lundie, but Lady Lundie's maid.

The woman's account of what had happened at Windygates was simple enough. Lady Lundie had, as a matter of course, placed the right interpretation on Blanche's abrupt departure in the pony-chaise, and had ordered the carriage, with the firm determination of following her step-daughter herself. But the agitations and anxieties of the day had proved too much for her. She had been seized by one of the attacks of giddiness to which she was always subject after excessive mental irritation; and, eager as she was (on more accounts than one) to go to the inn herself, she had been compelled, in Sir Patrick's absence, to commit the pursuit of Blanche to her own maid, in whose age and good sense she could place every confidence. The woman seeing the state of the weather--had thoughtfully brought a box with her, containing a change of wearing apparel. In offering it to Blanche, she added, with all due respect, that she had full powers from her mistress to go on, if necessary, to the shooting-cottage, and to place the matter in Sir Patrick's hands. This said, she left it to her young lady to decide for herself, whether she would return to Windygates, under present circumstances, or not.

Blanche took the box from the woman's hands, and joined Anne in the bedroom, to dress herself for the drive home.

"I am going back to a good scolding," she said. "But a scolding is no novelty in my experience of Lady Lundie. I'm not uneasy about that, Anne--I'm uneasy about you. Can I be sure of one thing--do you stay here for the present?"

The worst that could happen at the inn \_had\_ happened. Nothing was to be gained now--and every thing might be lost--by leaving the place at which Geoffrey had promised to write to her. Anne answered that she proposed remaining at the inn for the present.

"You promise to write to me?"

"Yes."

"If there is any thing I can do for you--?"

"There is nothing, my love."

"There may be. If you want to see me, we can meet at Windygates without being discovered. Come at luncheon-time--go around by the shrubbery--and step in at the library window. You know as well as I do there is nobody in the library at that hour. Don't say it's impossible--you don't know what may happen. I shall wait ten minutes every day on the chance of seeing you. That's settled--and it's settled that you write. Before I go, darling, is there any thing else we can think of for the future?"

At those words Anne suddenly shook off the depression that weighed on her. She caught Blanche in her arms, she held Blanche to her bosom with a fierce energy. "Will you always be to me, in the future, what you are now?" she asked, abruptly. "Or is the time coming when you will hate me?" She prevented any reply by a kiss--and pushed Blanche toward the door. "We have had a happy time together in the years that are gone," she said, with a farewell wave of her hand. "Thank God for that! And never mind the rest."

She threw open the bedroom door, and called to the maid, in the sitting-room. "Miss Lundie is waiting for you." Blanche pressed her hand, and left her.

Anne waited a while in the bedroom, listening to the sound made by the departure of the carriage from the inn door. Little by little, the tramp of the horses and the noise of the rolling wheels lessened and lessened. When the last faint sounds were lost in silence she stood for a moment thinking--then, rousing on a sudden, hurried into the sitting-room, and rang the bell.

"I shall go mad," she said to herself, "if I stay here alone."

Even Mr. Bishopriggs felt the necessity of being silent when he stood face to face with her on answering the bell.

"I want to speak to him. Send him here instantly."

Mr. Bishopriggs understood her, and withdrew.

Arnold came in.

"Has she gone?" were the first words he said.

"She has gone. She won't suspect you when you see her again. I have told her nothing. Don't ask me for my reasons!"

"I have no wish to ask you."

"Be angry with me, if you like!"

"I have no wish to be angry with you."

He spoke and looked like an altered man. Quietly seating himself at the table, he rested his head on his hand--and so remained silent. Anne was taken completely by surprise. She drew near, and looked at him curiously. Let a woman's mood be what it may, it is certain to feel the influence of any change for which she is unprepared in the manner of a man--when that man interests her. The cause of this is not to be found in the variability of her humor. It is far more probably to be traced to the noble abnegation of Self, which is one of the grandest--and to the credit of woman be it said--one of the commonest virtues of the sex. Little by little, the sweet feminine charm of Anne's face came softly and sadly back. The inbred nobility of the woman's nature answered the call which the man had unconsciously made on it. She touched Arnold on the shoulder.

"This has been hard on \_you,\_" she said. "And I am to blame for it. Try and forgive me, Mr. Brinkworth. I am sincerely sorry. I wish with all my heart I could comfort you!"

"Thank you, Miss Silvester. It was not a very pleasant feeling, to be hiding from Blanche as if I was afraid of her--and it's set me thinking, I suppose, for the first time in my life. Never mind. It's all over now. Can I do any thing for you?"

"What do you propose doing to-night?"

"What I have proposed doing all along--my duty by Geoffrey. I have promised him to see you through your difficulties here, and to provide for your safety till he comes back. I can only make sure of doing that by keeping up appearances, and staying in the sitting-room to-night. When we next meet it will be under pleasanter circumstances, I hope. I shall always be glad to think that I was of some service to you. In the mean time I shall be most likely away to-morrow morning before you are up."

Anne held out her hand to take leave. Nothing could undo what had been done. The time for warning and remonstrance had passed away.

"You have not befriended an ungrateful woman," she said. "The day may yet come, Mr. Brinkworth, when I shall prove it."

"I hope not, Miss Silvester. Good-by, and good luck!"

She withdrew into her own room. Arnold locked the sitting-room door, and stretched himself on the sofa for the night.

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The morning was bright, the air was delicious after the storm.

Arnold had gone, as he had promised, before Anne was out of her room. It was understood at the inn that important business had unexpectedly called him south. Mr. Bishopriggs had been presented with a handsome gratuity; and Mrs. Inchbare had been informed that the rooms were taken for a week certain.

In every quarter but one the march of events had now, to all appearance, fallen back into a quiet course. Arnold was on his way to his estate; Blanche was safe at Windygates; Anne's residence at the inn was assured for a week to come. The one present doubt was the doubt which hung over Geoffrey's movements. The one event still involved in darkness turned on the question of life or death waiting for solution in London--otherwise, the question of Lord Holchester's health. Taken by itself, the alternative, either way, was plain enough. If my lord lived--Geoffrey would be free to come back, and marry her privately in Scotland. If my lord died--Geoffrey would be free to send for her, and marry her publicly in London. But could Geoffrey be relied on?

Anne went out on to the terrace-ground in front of the inn. The cool morning breeze blew steadily. Towering white clouds sailed in grand procession over the heavens, now obscuring, and now revealing the sun. Yellow light and purple shadow chased each other over the broad brown surface of the moor--even as hope and fear chased each other over Anne's mind, brooding on what might come to her with the coming time.

She turned away, weary of questioning the impenetrable future, and went back to the inn.

Crossing the hall she looked at the clock. It was past the hour when the train from Perthshire was due in London. Geoffrey and his brother were, at that moment, on their way to Lord Holchester's house.