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Chapter 24 - Backward

"WELL?" whispered Blanche, taking her uncle confidentially by the arm.

"Well," said Sir Patrick, with a spark of his satirical humor flashing out at his niece, "I am going to do a very rash thing. I am going to place a serious trust in the hands of a girl of eighteen."

"The girl's hands will keep it, uncle--though she is only eighteen."

"I must run the risk, my dear; your intimate knowledge of Miss Silvester may be of the greatest assistance to me in the next step I take. You shall know all that I can tell you, but I must warn you first. I can only admit you into my confidence by startling you with a great surprise. Do you follow me, so far?"

"Yes! yes!"

"If you fail to control yourself, you place an obstacle in the way of my being of some future use to Miss Silvester. Remember that, and now prepare for the surprise. What did I tell you before dinner?"

"You said you had made discoveries at Craig Fernie. What have you found out?"

"I have found out that there is a certain person who is in full possession of the information which Miss Silvester has concealed from you and from me. The person is within our reach. The person is in this neighborhood. The person is in this room!"

He caught up Blanche's hand, resting on his arm, and pressed it significantly. She looked at him with the cry of surprise suspended on her lips--waited a little with her eyes fixed on Sir Patrick's face--struggled resolutely, and composed herself.

"Point the person out." She said the words with a self-possession which won her uncle's hearty approval. Blanche had done wonders for a girl in her teens.

"Look!" said Sir Patrick; "and tell me what you see."

"I see Lady Lundie, at the other end of the room, with the map of Perthshire and the Baronial Antiquities of Scotland on the table. And I see every body but you and me obliged to listen to her."

"Every body?"

Blanche looked carefully round the room, and noticed Geoffrey in the opposite corner; fast asleep by this time in his arm-chair.

"Uncle! you don't mean--?"

"There is the man."

"Mr. Delamayn--!"

"Mr. Delamayn knows every thing."

Blanche held mechanically by her uncle's arm, and looked at the sleeping man as if her eyes could never see enough of him.

"You saw me in the library in private consultation with Mr. Delamayn," resumed Sir Patrick. "I have to acknowledge, my dear, that you were quite right in thinking this a suspicious circumstance, and I am now to justify myself for having purposely kept you in the dark up to the present time."

With those introductory words, he briefly reverted to the earlier occurrences of the day, and then added, by way of commentary, a statement of the conclusions which events had suggested to his own mind.

The events, it may be remembered, were three in number. First, Geoffrey's private conference with Sir Patrick on the subject of Irregular Marriages in Scotland. Secondly, Anne Silvester's appearance at Windygates. Thirdly, Anne's flight.

The conclusions which had thereupon suggested themselves to Sir Patrick's mind were six in number.

First, that a connection of some sort might possibly exist between Geoffrey's acknowledged difficulty about his friend, and Miss Silvester's presumed difficulty about herself. Secondly, that Geoffrey had really put to Sir Patrick--not his own case--but the case of a friend. Thirdly, that Geoffrey had some interest (of no harmless kind) in establishing the fact of his friend's marriage. Fourthly, that Anne's anxiety (as described by Blanche) to hear the names of the gentlemen who were staying at Windygates, pointed, in all probability, to Geoffrey. Fifthly, that this last inference disturbed the second conclusion, and reopened the doubt whether Geoffrey had not been stating his own case, after all, under pretense of stating the case of a friend. Sixthly, that the one way of obtaining any enlightenment on this point, and on all the other points involved in mystery, was to go to Craig Fernie, and consult Mrs. Inchbare's experience during the period of Anne's residence at the inn. Sir Patrick's apology for keeping all this a secret from his niece followed. He had shrunk from agitating her on the subject until he could be sure of proving his conclusions to be true. The proof had been obtained; and he was now, therefore, ready to open his mind to Blanche without reserve.

"So much, my dear," proceeded Sir Patrick, "for those necessary explanations of my discovery of intercourse. You now know as much as I did when I arrived at Craig Fernie--and you are, therefore, in a position to appreciate the value of my discoveries at the inn. Do you understand every thing, so far?"

"Perfectly!"

"Very good. I drove up to the inn; and--behold me closeted with Mrs. Inchbare in her own private parlor! (My reputation may or may not suffer, but Mrs. Inchbare's bones are above suspicion!) It was a long business, Blanche. A more sour-tempered, cunning, and distrustful witness I never examined in all my experience at the Bar. She would have upset the temper of any mortal man but a lawyer. We have such wonderful tempers in our profession; and we can be so aggravating when we like! In short, my dear, Mrs. Inchbare was a she-cat, and I was a he-cat--and I clawed the truth out of her at last. The result was well worth arriving at, as you shall see. Mr. Delamayn had described to me certain remarkable circumstances as taking place between a lady and a gentleman at an inn: the object of the parties being to pass themselves off at the time as man and wife. Every one of those circumstances, Blanche, occurred at Craig Fernie, between a lady and a gentleman, on the day when Miss Silvester disappeared from this house And--wait!--being pressed for her name, after the gentleman had left her behind him at the inn, the name the lady gave was, 'Mrs. Silvester.' What do you think of that?"

"Think! I'm bewildered--I can't realize it."

"It's a startling discovery, my dear child--there is no denying that. Shall I wait a little, and let you recover yourself?"

"No! no! Go on! The gentleman, uncle? The gentleman who was with Anne? Who is he? Not Mr. Delamayn?"

"Not Mr. Delamayn," said Sir Patrick. "If I have proved nothing else, I have proved that."

"What need was there to prove it? Mr. Delamayn went to London on the day of the lawn-party. And Arnold--"

"And Arnold went with him as far as the second station from this. Quite true! But how was I to know what Mr. Delamayn might have done after Arnold had left him? I could only make sure that he had not gone back privately to the inn, by getting the proof from Mrs. Inchbare."

"How did you get it?"

"I asked her to describe the gentleman who was with Miss Silvester. Mrs. Inchbare's description (vague as you will presently find it to be) completely exonerates that man," said Sir Patrick, pointing to Geoffrey still asleep in his chair. "_He_ is not the person who passed Miss Silvester off as his wife at Craig Fernie. He spoke the truth when he described the case to me as the case of a friend."

"But who is the friend?" persisted Blanche. "That's what I want to know."

"That's what I want to know, too."

"Tell me exactly, uncle, what Mrs. Inchbare said. I have lived with Anne all my life. I _must_ have seen the man somewhere."

"If you can identify him by Mrs. Inchbare's description," returned Sir Patrick, "you will be a great deal cleverer than I am. Here is the picture of the man, as painted by the landlady: Young; middle-sized; dark hair, eyes, and complexion; nice temper, pleasant way of speaking. Leave out 'young,' and the rest is the exact contrary of Mr. Delamayn. So far, Mrs. Inchbare guides us plainly enough. But how are we to apply her description to the right person? There must be, at the lowest computation, five hundred thousand men in England who are young, middle-sized, dark, nice-tempered, and pleasant spoken. One of the footmen here answers that description in every particular."

"And Arnold answers it," said Blanche--as a still stronger instance of the provoking vagueness of the description.

"And Arnold answers it," repeated Sir Patrick, quite agreeing with her.

They had barely said those words when Arnold himself appeared, approaching Sir Patrick with a pack of cards in his hand.

There--at the very moment when they had both guessed the truth, without feeling the slightest suspicion of it in their own minds--there stood Discovery, presenting itself unconsciously to eyes incapable of seeing it, in the person of the man who had passed Anne Silvester off as his wife at the Craig Fernie inn! The terrible caprice of Chance, the merciless irony of Circumstance, could go no further than this. The three had their feet on the brink of the precipice at that moment. And two of them were smiling at an odd coincidence; and one of them was shuffling a pack of cards!

"We have done with the Antiquities at last!" said Arnold; "and we are going to play at Whist. Sir Patrick, will you choose a card?"

"Too soon after dinner, my good fellow, for _me_. Play the first rubber, and then give me another chance. By-the-way," he added "Miss Silvester has been traced to Kirkandrew. How is it that you never saw her go by?"

"She can't have gone my way, Sir Patrick, or I must have seen her."

Having justified himself in those terms, he was recalled to the other end of the room by the whist-party, impatient for the cards which he had in his hand.

"What were we talking of when he interrupted us?" said Sir Patrick to Blanche.

"Of the man, uncle, who was with Miss Silvester at the inn."

"It's useless to pursue that inquiry, my dear, with nothing better than Mrs. Inchbare's description to help us."

Blanche looked round at the sleeping Geoffrey.

"And _he_ knows!" she said. "It's maddening, uncle, to look at the brute snoring in his chair!"

Sir Patrick held up a warning hand. Before a word more could be said between them they were silenced again by another interruption,

The whist-party comprised Lady Lundie and the surgeon, playing as partners against Smith and Jones. Arnold sat behind the surgeon, taking a lesson in the game. One, Two,

and Three, thus left to their own devices, naturally thought of the billiard-table; and, detecting Geoffrey asleep in his corner, advanced to disturb his slumbers, under the all-sufficing apology of "Pool." Geoffrey roused himself, and rubbed his eyes, and said, drowsily, "All right." As he rose, he looked at the opposite corner in which Sir Patrick and his niece were sitting. Blanche's self-possession, resolutely as she struggled to preserve it, was not strong enough to keep her eyes from turning toward Geoffrey with an expression which betrayed the reluctant interest that she now felt in him. He stopped, noticing something entirely new in the look with which the young lady was regarding him.

"Beg your pardon," said Geoffrey. "Do you wish to speak to me?"

Blanche's face flushed all over. Her uncle came to the rescue.

"Miss Lundie and I hope you have slept well Mr. Delamayn," said Sir Patrick, jocosely. "That's all."

"Oh? That's all?" said Geoffrey still looking at Blanche. "Beg your pardon again. Deuced long walk, and deuced heavy dinner. Natural consequence--a nap."

Sir Patrick eyed him closely. It was plain that he had been honestly puzzled at finding himself an object of special attention on Blanche's part. "See you in the billiard-room?" he said, carelessly, and followed his companions out of the room--as usual, without waiting for an answer.

"Mind what you are about," said Sir Patrick to his niece. "That man is quicker than he looks. We commit a serious mistake if we put him on his guard at starting."

"It sha'n't happen again, uncle," said Blanche. "But think of _his_ being in Anne's confidence, and of _my_ being shut out of it!"

"In his friend's confidence, you mean, my dear; and (if we only avoid awakening his suspicion) there is no knowing how soon he may say or do something which may show us who his friend is."

"But he is going back to his brother's to-morrow--he said so at dinner-time."

"So much the better. He will be out of the way of seeing strange things in a certain young lady's face. His brother's house is within easy reach of this; and I am his legal adviser. My experience tells me that he has not done consulting me yet--and that he will let out something more next time. So much for our chance of seeing the light through Mr. Delamayn--if we can't see it in any other way. And that is not our only chance, remember. I have something to tell you about Bishopriggs and the lost letter."

"Is it found?"

"No. I satisfied myself about that--I had it searched for, under my own eye. The letter is stolen, Blanche; and Bishopriggs has got it. I have left a line for him, in Mrs. Inchbare's care. The old rascal is missed already by the visitors at the inn, just as I told you he would be. His mistress is feeling the penalty of having been fool enough to vent her ill temper on her head-waiter. She lays the whole blame of the quarrel on Miss Silvester, of course. Bishopriggs neglected every body at the inn to wait on Miss Silvester. Bishopriggs was insolent on being remonstrated with, and Miss Silvester encouraged him--and so on. The result will be--now Miss Silvester has gone--that Bishopriggs will return to Craig Fernie before the autumn is over. We are sailing with wind and tide, my dear. Come, and learn to play whist."

He rose to join the card-players. Blanche detained him.

"You haven't told me one thing yet," she said. "Whoever the man may be, is Anne married to him?"

"Whoever the man may be," returned Sir Patrick, "he had better not attempt to marry any body else."

So the niece unconsciously put the question, and so the uncle unconsciously gave the answer on which depended the whole happiness of Blanche's life to come, The "man!" How lightly they both talked of the "man!" Would nothing happen to rouse the faintest suspicion--in their minds or in Arnold's mind--that Arnold was the "man" himself?

"You mean that she _is_ married?" said Blanche.

"I don't go as far as that."

"You mean that she is _not_ married?"

"I don't go so far as _that_."

"Oh! the law! "

"Provoking, isn't it, my dear? I can tell you, professionally, that (in my opinion) she has grounds to go on if she claims to be the man's wife. That is what I meant by my answer; and, until we know more, that is all I can say."

"When shall we know more? When shall we get the telegram?"

"Not for some hours yet. Come, and learn to play whist."

"I think I would rather talk to Arnold, uncle, if you don't mind."

"By all means! But don't talk to him about what I have been telling you to-night. He and Mr. Delamayn are old associates, remember; and he might blunder into telling his friend what his friend had better not know. Sad (isn't it?) for me to be instilling these lessons of duplicity into the youthful mind. A wise person once said, 'The older a man gets the worse he gets.' That wise person, my dear, had me in his eye, and was perfectly right."

He mitigated the pain of that confession with a pinch of snuff, and went to the whist table to wait until the end of the rubber gave him a place at the game.