

Miss or Mrs.?

By

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First Scene: At Sea.....	3
Second Scene: The Store-Room	18
Third Scene: The Money Market.....	31
Fourth Scene: Muswell Hill.....	36
Fifth Scene: The Square.....	42
Sixth Scene: The Church	49
Seventh Scene: The Evening Party	52
Eighth Scene: The Library	61
Ninth Scene: The Drawing-Room	69
Tenth Scene: Green Anchor Lane.....	74
Eleventh Scene: Outside the House	78
Twelfth Scene: Inside the House	81

First Scene: At Sea

The night had come to an end. The new-born day waited for its quickening light in the silence that is never known on land--the silence before sunrise, in a calm at sea.

Not a breath came from the dead air. Not a ripple stirred on the motionless water. Nothing changed but the softly-growing light; nothing moved but the lazy mist, curling up to meet the sun, its master, on the eastward sea. By fine gradations, the airy veil of morning thinned in substance as it rose--thinned, till there dawned through it in the first rays of sunlight the tall white sails of a Schooner Yacht.

From stem to stern silence possessed the vessel--as silence possessed the sea.

But one living creature was on deck--the man at the helm, dozing peaceably with his arm over the useless tiller. Minute by minute the light grew, and the heat grew with it; and still the helmsman slumbered, the heavy sails hung noiseless, the quiet water lay sleeping against the vessel's sides. The whole orb of the sun was visible above the water-line, when the first sound pierced its way through the morning silence. From far off over the shining white ocean, the cry of a sea-bird reached the yacht on a sudden out of the last airy circles of the waning mist.

The sleeper at the helm woke; looked up at the idle sails, and yawned in sympathy with them; looked out at the sea on either side of him, and shook his head obstinately at the superior obstinacy of the calm.

"Blow, my little breeze!" said the man, whistling the sailor's invocation to the wind softly between his teeth. "Blow, my little breeze!"

"How's her head?" cried a bold and brassy voice, hailing the deck from the cabin staircase.

"Anywhere you like, master; all round the compass."

The voice was followed by the man. The owner of the yacht appeared on deck.

Behold Richard Turlington, Esq., of the great Levant firm of Pizzituti, Turlington & Branca! Aged eight-and-thirty; standing stiffly and sturdily at a height of not more than five feet six-- Mr. Turlington presented to the view of his fellow-creatures a face of the perpendicular order of human architecture. His forehead was a straight line, his upper lip was another, his chin was the straightest and the longest line of all. As he turned his swarthy countenance eastward, and shaded his light gray eyes from the sun, his knotty hand plainly revealed that it had got him his living by its own labor at one time or another in his life. Taken on the whole, this was a man whom it might be easy to respect, but whom it would be hard to love. Better company at the official desk than at the social table. Morally and physically--if the expression may be permitted--a man without a bend in him.

"A calm yesterday," grumbled Richard Turlington, looking with stubborn deliberation all round him. "And a calm to-day. Ha! next season I'll have the vessel fitted with engines. I hate this!"

"Think of the filthy coals, and the infernal vibration, and leave your beautiful schooner as she is. We are out for a holiday. Let the wind and the sea take a holiday too."

Pronouncing those words of remonstrance, a slim, nimble, curly-headed young gentleman joined Richard Turlington on deck, with his clothes under his arm, his towels in his hand, and nothing on him but the night-gown in which he had stepped out of his bed.

"Launcelot Linzie, you have been received on board my vessel in the capacity of medical attendant on Miss Natalie Graybrooke, at her father's request. Keep your place, if you please. When I want your advice, I'll ask you for it." Answering in those terms, the elder man fixed his colorless gray eyes on the younger with an expression which added plainly, "There won't be room enough in this schooner much longer for me and for you."

Launcelot Linzie had his reasons (apparently) for declining to let his host offend him on any terms whatever.

"Thank you!" he rejoined, in a tone of satirical good humor. "It isn't easy to keep my place on board your vessel. I can't help presuming to enjoy myself as if I was the owner. The life is such a new one--to me!>/l> It's so delightfully easy, for instance, to wash yourself here. On shore it's a complicated question of jugs and basins and tubs; one is always in danger of breaking something, or spoiling something. Here you have only to jump out of bed, to run up on deck, and to do this!"

He turned, and scampered to the bows of the vessel. In one instant he was out of his night-gown, in another he was on the bulwark, in a third he was gamboling luxuriously in sixty fathoms of salt-water.

Turlington's eyes followed him with a reluctant, uneasy attention as he swam round the vessel, the only moving object in view. Turlington's mind, steady and slow in all its operations, set him a problem to be solved, on given conditions, as follows:

"Launcelot Linzie is fifteen years younger than I am. Add to that, Launcelot Linzie is Natalie Graybrooke's cousin. Given those two advantages--Query: Has he taken Natalie's fancy?"

Turning that question slowly over and over in his mind, Richard Turlington seated himself in a corner at the stern of the vessel. He was still at work on the problem, when the young surgeon returned to his cabin to put the finishing touches to his toilet. He had not reached the solution when the steward appeared an hour later and said, "Breakfast is ready, sir!"

They were a party of five round the cabin table.

First, Sir Joseph Graybrooke. Inheritor of a handsome fortune made by his father and his grandfather in trade. Mayor, twice elected, of a thriving provincial town. Officially privileged, while holding that dignity, to hand a silver trowel to a royal personage condescending to lay a first stone of a charitable edifice. Knighted, accordingly, in honor of the occasion. Worthy of the honor and worthy of the occasion. A type of his eminently respectable class. Possessed of an amiable, rosy face, and soft, silky white hair. Sound in his principles; tidy in his dress;

blessed with moderate politics and a good digestion--a harmless, healthy, spruce, speckless, weak-minded old man.

Secondly, Miss Lavinia Graybrooke, Sir Joseph's maiden sister. Personally, Sir Joseph in petticoats. If you knew one you knew the other.

Thirdly, Miss Natalie Graybrooke--Sir Joseph's only child.

She had inherited the personal appearance and the temperament of her mother--dead many years since. There had been a mixture of Negro blood and French blood in the late Lady Graybrooke's family, settled originally in Martinique. Natalie had her mother's warm dusky color, her mother's superb black hair, and her mother's melting, lazy, lovely brown eyes. At fifteen years of age (dating from her last birthday) she possessed the development of the bosom and limbs which in England is rarely attained before twenty. Everything about the girl--except her little rosy ears--was on a grand Amazonian scale. Her shapely hand was long and large; her supple waist was the waist of a woman. The indolent grace of all her movements had its motive power in an almost masculine firmness of action and profusion of physical resource. This remarkable bodily development was far from being accompanied by any corresponding development of character. Natalie's manner was the gentle, innocent manner of a young girl. She had her father's sweet temper ingrafted on her mother's variable Southern nature. She moved like a goddess, and she laughed like a child. Signs of maturing too rapidly--of outgrowing her strength, as the phrase went--had made their appearance in Sir Joseph's daughter during the spring. The family doctor had suggested a sea-voyage, as a wise manner of employing the fine summer months. Richard Turlington's yacht was placed at her disposal, with Richard Turlington himself included as one of the fixtures of the vessel. With her father and her aunt to keep up round her the atmosphere of home--with Cousin Launcelot (more commonly known as "Launce") to carry out, if necessary, the medical treatment prescribed by superior authority on shore--the lovely invalid embarked on her summer cruise, and sprang up into a new existence in the life-giving breezes of the sea. After two happy months of lazy coasting round the shores of England, all that remained of Natalie's illness was represented by a delicious languor in her eyes, and an utter inability to devote herself to anything

which took the shape of a serious occupation. As she sat at the cabin breakfast-table that morning, in her quaintly-made sailing dress of old-fashioned nankeen--her inbred childishness of manner contrasting delightfully with the blooming maturity of her form--the man must have been trebly armed indeed in the modern philosophy who could have denied that the first of a woman's rights is the right of being beautiful; and the foremost of a woman's merits, the merit of being young!

The other two persons present at the table were the two gentlemen who have already appeared on the deck of the yacht.

"Not a breath of wind stirring!" said Richard Turlington. "The weather has got a grudge against us. We have drifted about four or five miles in the last eight-and-forty hours. You will never take another cruise with me--you must be longing to get on shore."

He addressed himself to Natalie; plainly eager to make himself agreeable to the young lady--and plainly unsuccessful in producing any impression on her. She made a civil answer; and looked at her tea-cup, instead of looking at Richard Turlington.

"You might fancy yourself on shore at this moment," said Launce. "The vessel is as steady as a house, and the swing-table we are eating our breakfast on is as even as your dining-room table at home."

He too addressed himself to Natalie, but without betraying the anxiety to please her which had been shown by the other. For all that, he diverted the girl's attention from her tea-cup; and his idea instantly awakened a responsive idea in Natalie's mind.

"It will be so strange on shore," she said, "to find myself in a room that never turns on one side, and to sit at a table that never tilts down to my knees at one time, or rises up to my chin at another. How I shall miss the wash of the water at my ear, and the ring of the bell on deck. when I am awake at night on land! No interest there in how the wind blows, or how the sails are set. No asking your way of the sun, when you are lost, with a little brass instrument and a morsel of pencil and paper. No delightful wandering wherever the wind takes you, without the

worry of planning beforehand where you are to go. Oh how I shall miss the dear, changeable, inconstant sea! And how sorry I am I'm not a man and a sailor!"

This to the guest admitted on board on sufferance, and not one word of it addressed, even by chance, to the owner of the yacht!

Richard Turlington's heavy eyebrows contracted with an unmistakable expression of pain.

"If this calm weather holds," he went on, addressing himself to Sir Joseph, "I am afraid, Graybrooke, I shall not be able to bring you back to the port we sailed from by the end of the week."

"Whenever you like, Richard," answered the old gentleman, resignedly. "Any time will do for me."

"Any time within reasonable limits, Joseph," said Miss Lavinia, evidently feeling that her brother was conceding too much. She spoke with Sir Joseph's amiable smile and Sir Joseph's softly-pitched voice. Two twin babies could hardly have been more like one another.

While these few words were being exchanged among the elders, a private communication was in course of progress between the two young people under the cabin table. Natalie's smartly-slippered foot felt its way cautiously inch by inch over the carpet till it touched Launce's boot. Launce, devouring his breakfast, instantly looked up from his plate, and then, at a second touch from Natalie, looked down again in a violent hurry. After pausing to make sure that she was not noticed, Natalie took up her knife. Under a perfectly-acted pretense of toying with it absently, in the character of a young lady absorbed in thought, she began dividing a morsel of ham left on the edge of her plate, into six tiny pieces. Launce's eye looked in sidelong expectation at the divided and subdivided ham. He was evidently waiting to see the collection of morsels put to some telegraphic use, previously determined on between his neighbor and himself.

In the meanwhile the talk proceeded among the other persons at the breakfast-table. Miss Lavinia addressed herself to Launce.

"Do you know, you careless boy, you gave me a fright this morning? I was sleeping with my cabin window open, and I was awoken by an awful splash in the water. I called for the stewardess. I declare I thought somebody had fallen overboard!"

Sir Joseph looked up briskly; his sister had accidentally touched on an old association.

"Talk of falling overboard," he began, "reminds me of an extraordinary adventure-
-"

There Launce broke in, making his apologies.

"It shan't occur again, Miss Lavinia," he said. "To-morrow morning I'll oil myself all over, and slip into the water as silently as a seal."

"Of an extraordinary adventure," persisted Sir Joseph

He stopped, and looked interrogatively at his sister. Miss Graybrooke nodded her head responsively, and settled herself in her chair, as if summoning her attention in anticipation of a coming demand on it. To persons well acquainted with the brother and sister these proceedings were ominous of an impending narrative, protracted to a formidable length. The two always told a story in couples, and always differed with each other about the facts, the sister politely contradicting the brother when it was Sir Joseph's story, and the brother politely contradicting the sister when it was Miss Lavinia's story. Separated one from the other, and thus relieved of their own habitual interchange of contradiction, neither of them had ever been known to attempt the relation of the simplest series of events without breaking down.

"It was five years before I knew you, Richard," proceeded Sir Joseph.

"Six years," said Miss Graybrooke.

"Excuse me, Lavinia."

"No, Joseph, I have it down in my diary."

"Let us waive the point." (Sir Joseph invariably used this formula as a means of at once conciliating his sister, and getting a fresh start for his story.) "I was cruising off the Mersey in a Liverpool pilot-boat. I had hired the boat in company with a friend of mine, formerly notorious in London society, under the nickname (derived from the peculiar brown color of his whiskers) of 'Mahogany Dobbs.'"

"The color of his liveries, Joseph, not the color of his whiskers."

"My dear Lavinia, you are thinking of 'Sea-green Shaw,' so called from the extraordinary liveries he adopted for his servants in the year when he was sheriff."

"I think not, Joseph."

"I beg your pardon, Lavinia."

Richard Turlington's knotty fingers drummed impatiently on the table. He looked toward Natalie. She was idly arranging her little morsels of ham in a pattern on her plate. Launcelot Linzie, still more idly, was looking at the pattern. Seeing what he saw now, Richard solved the problem which had puzzled him on deck. It was simply impossible that Natalie's fancy could be really taken by such an empty-headed fool as that!

Sir Joseph went on with his story:

"We were some ten or a dozen miles off the mouth of the Mersey--"

"Nautical miles, Joseph."

"It doesn't matter, Lavinia."

"Excuse me, brother, the late great and good Doctor Johnson said accuracy ought always to be studied even in the most trifling things."

"They were common miles, Lavinia."

"They were nautical miles, Joseph."

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