

whole packet of letters, including the two from Hugh, unopened, into the fire.

Polly Tarrant listened with open eyes to her young mistress's rhapsody, but when she saw those two letters cast unopened into the flames, she was literally petrified with amazement. She knew the handwriting of those two letters only too well. Last year, if there was a probability of anything arriving in that hand Miss Lynden had often forestalled herself in answering the postman's knock. She had seen those letters eagerly clutched, she had seen them read and re-read, and now, as Polly expressed it—"she's a treating them like trade circulars."

"Polly!" said Miss Lynden, turning almost fiercely round upon her, and speaking in low, hurried tones, "I daresay you've heard me laughed at. I daresay you've heard all sorts of horrid things about me and my poor father—"

"Indeed, miss," interposed Polly, "I haven't heard a word against you, except from the landlord, who was always growling at the poor Doctor about that half-year's rent."

"Don't interrupt me," continued Miss Lynden, "I'm going to write you down my lawyer's address. You must go up to the old house every now and then, and any letters that may come for me or my poor father you will take to him. And through him you can write to me yourself occasionally, but remember that you are to deny all knowledge of me to everyone. Let no one know of any way in which a letter can reach me. For months and years," and she glanced at her dress, "this will be my excuse for close retirement. I want to forget—ah! I have so much to forget. Never speak to me of the Crimea again. Let that terrible year be as if it had never been; let no one know that you have seen me. And now I must say good-bye. You promise faithfully to do all I have asked;" and Polly, who was genuinely attached to her young mistress, and by this time dissolved in tears, although she did not understand about what, willingly faltered out the required pledge.

"Once more good-bye," said Miss Lynden. "I had no chance of giving you a wedding present before, so you must take this and buy yourself something now;" and as she spoke Miss Lynden slipped a banknote into Polly's hand, pressed it and was gone.

Polly sat down and enjoyed the luxury of a good cry with her cup of tea; and I have feminine authority for saying that there is much enjoyment in a "good howl." What she was crying about Polly was not very clear, but I have also a suspicion that that is by no means necessary for its thorough appreciation. Her old master was dead, and her young mistress was in trouble, and it was very kind of Miss Nellie to give her five pounds as a wedding present, and then Polly's thoughts wandered off as to what she should do with it. I have an idea that she did not consult her husband on this point, having already learnt that the knowledge of any such windfall was best kept to herself. She did not know quite what had happened, but one thing was clear, Miss Nellie never wished to hear of the Crimea or Captain Fleming again. She wondered what had gone wrong between them, but of one thing she was resolved, and that was to adhere firmly to the promise she had given.

Only two days had elapsed, and Polly as usual was sitting in the window once more immersed in her sewing, when the sharp crunch of a man's boot on the gravel caused her to raise her head. Another moment an impatient tap at the door betokened another visitor. She opened it, and found herself face to face with Major Byng. She recognized him at once and knew what errand he had come upon. It was all very well for Miss Nellie to have done with the Crimea, but the Crimea hadn't done with Miss Nellie. She curtsied, put forward a chair, and asked Byng to sit down.

"Well, Mrs. Tarrant, how are you?" said Tom. "You recognize me, of course?"

"Oh, yes, Major Byng and I'm very glad to see you back safe again, after all you have gone through."

"Thank you; yes, we had some roughish times out there. But you've got married since I last

saw you. I congratulate you, and as an old friend you must accept a gift from me upon the occasion;" and Tom attempted to force a liberal *douceur* into her palm, but Polly hastily stepped back a pace or two, and putting her hands behind her, said:

"I thank you very much, sir, but I cannot take your money."

"Why should you refuse a wedding present from me?" asked Tom, in no little astonishment.

"No matter, sir, I have my reasons; thank you very kindly all the same."

"Of course, you must do as you like, but it's rather a slight upon an old friend," said Tom, smiling, "more especially one who has come all the way from London to see you."

"Oh, no you've not, sir," said Mrs. Tarrant, looking decidedly obstinate, and as Tom said afterwards, "most confoundedly knowing to boot."

"There, you're wrong, for I have come from London to see you. I have come to ask you a question."

Mrs. Tarrant made no attempt to help him out, but waited quite demurely till it pleased him to speak.

"I want to know where Miss Lynden is at present."

"I don't know, sir," said Polly, somewhat equivocally.

"But do you know her address?" said Tom, sharply.

"I don't admit I do, and if I did I wouldn't tell you."

"She knows it perfectly," thought Tom to himself.

"When did you see her last?" he enquired, with what he deemed much forensic ability, but the result rather startled him, for Mrs. Tarrant suddenly drew herself up defiantly, and replied:

"Look here, Major Byng, I'm not in the witness box, and I haven't married a police constable without having learnt that what I say may be used against me. Where is Miss Lynden now? I don't know. What's her address? I don't know. When did I see her last? I don't know. But I have every reason to believe," concluded Polly, with indignant partisanship, "that she desires to have seen the last of you, and all of you, and maybe it would have been better if she had never seen the first of you either."

And now Tom committed a fatal error. Mrs. Tarrant had gradually lashed herself into a very pretty fit of virtuous indignation, and in a vain endeavour to calm the storm, he prefaced his next speech with, "My good woman." This was pouring oil upon the fire; there was never an angry woman yet that this epithet did not goad to madness. It is galling, when you have given a loose rein to all the devil in your nature to find it ignored and be blandly addressed as "good." Mrs. Tarrant was no exception to the rule, and indulged in a most uncomplimentary diatribe against the Army, generally expressed her opinion that it was a great pity that those who went to the Crimea hadn't stayed there, and that they ought to be ashamed to show themselves in Manchester, they ought. Still amidst all this flow of language, Polly gave no clue to the cause of it, and Byng, at last convinced that there was no information to be obtained from her, was only too glad to fly from the storm he had raised.

"Well," he thought, as he tramped back, "this is a devil of a sell. There is no doubt she knows where Miss Lynden is, and what her address is, but she's determined not to give it. I thought I was going to carry back such a bit of good news to Hugh. I wonder whether I bungled the business, whether offering her money at starting put her hump up? Thought I did it diplomatically, too; however, when a woman won't, she won't, and there's an end of it, and if ever a woman said 'shan't tell,' and meant it, it's Polly Tarrant. By Jove," he continued, taking out his watch, "I'm too late to go back to town to-night; luckily I've got a portmanteau at the station. I'll send for it, and get a bed and dinner at the Queen's."

#### CHAPTER XXVI.—THE AMBASSADOR.

Almost the first man that Byng encountered in the hall of the Queen's Hotel was Hugh Fleming,

and having given the necessary directions about his portmanteau, he at once bore him off to the smoking-room, to hear the account of his doings and disasters since they last met.

"It's something, you know," said Tom, as he came to the end of his narration, "to have got this far. We've found Polly Phybbs that was, and I've ascertained that she knows all about it. Now the thing is to make her speak. She won't for me, that's quite clear. Miss Lynden's dead full against you, and you've no chance of making it up with her, unless you meet her face to face. Mrs. Tarrant takes her late mistress' part, and is an out and out partisan, and no mistake. I don't know what chance you have, but you'll have to try; I don't see anything else for it."

"No, I must do my best," said Hugh. "I knew her a little bit better than you did, and of course she knew Nellie and I were engaged. It's quite possible she was indignant with you, because she thought I ought to have been there in your stead. Heaven knows I should have been, if I could have found her. I've been vainly trying to, for the last three days." So it was finally settled between them that Hugh should try what he could do with the implacable Mrs. Tarrant.

Though that lady gave a little start of surprise when Fleming presented himself the next afternoon, still there was defiance in every fold of her dress, contemptuous obstinacy in every line of her countenance. Neither money nor argument should wring Miss Nellie's secrets out of her, and if they insisted in worrifying her in her own house, well they should have a bit of her mind, that was all. If Miss Nellie was above telling Captain Fleming what she thought of him, she wasn't. She frigidly acknowledged Hugh's greeting and placed a chair for him, but it required no penetration to see that though at present on the defensive, she was prepared to assume the aggressive on slight provocation. Hugh wasted but short time on preliminaries but came to the point at once. Would she give him Miss Lynden's address. He did not question whether she knew it; would she give it him? And Mrs. Tarrant's reply was, "not if she knew it," in every sense of the phrase. In vain did Hugh attempt to cross-question her. She would admit nothing, and gave palpable signs of becoming peppery under the operation. Quickly retrieving his false step, Hugh urged that he was engaged, as she knew, to Miss Lynden; that he had just returned from the Crimea, hoping to marry her, and that he could hear nothing of her; that she was withholding her address from him under a most erroneous impression; that there had been an infamous lie circulated about him in Manchester—could Mademoiselle Ivanhoff but have heard that; that this lie had probably reached Miss Lynden's ears; that it had already occasioned him infinite unhappiness; that he had at all events a right to demand an interview, if it was only to justify himself in her eyes—rather a high tone this to take under the circumstances—now would she give him Miss Lynden's address?

No, she would not; but though Polly was still inflexible in her refusal, she had softened very much in her manner. Hugh pleaded well, and Mrs. Tarrant was not insensible altogether to the titillation of acting as proxy for her mistress, in a good, strong love scene. She could not help thinking that if she had been Miss Nellie she would have at all events heard what Captain Fleming had got to say for himself. Whatever it was Miss Nellie thought he had done, it seemed they had been telling lies of him. But no, she had promised her young mistress, and she would be true to her word. Hugh at last saw that it was useless; he was conscious that he had progressed rapidly in Mrs. Tarrant's good graces, but he saw that she was quite inflexible in her determination to tell him nothing whatever about Miss Lynden.

"Good bye, Mrs. Tarrant," he said at last, "you've no doubt good reasons for refusing to give me her address, but you are wrong, and before long Miss Lynden herself will tell you so."

As he uttered the above words, a man's head was suddenly thrust in at the open window, which, as Hugh at once guessed, belonged to Mr. Tarrant