

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

Candlelight View of the Man

THERE had been barely light enough left for me to read by. Zillah lit the candles and drew the curtains. The silence which betokens a profound disappointment reigned in the room.

"Who can he be?" repeated Lucilla, for the hundredth time. "And why should your looking at him have distressed him? Guess, Madame Pratolungo!"

The last sentence in the gazetteer's description of Exeter hung a little on my mind--in consequence of there being one word in it which I did not quite understand--the word "Assizes." I have, I hope, shown that I possess a competent knowledge of the English language, by this time. But my experience fails a little on the side of phrases consecrated to the use of the law. I inquired into the meaning of "Assizes," and was informed that it signified movable Courts, for trying prisoners at given times, in various parts of England. Hearing this, I had another of my inspirations. I guessed immediately that the interesting stranger was a criminal escaped from the Assizes.

Worthy old Zillah started to her feet, convinced that I had hit him off (as the English saying is) to a T. "Mercy preserve us!" cried the nurse, "I haven't bolted the garden door!"

She hurried out of the room to defend us from robbery and murder, before it was too late. I looked at Lucilla. She was leaning back in her chair, with a smile of quiet contempt on her pretty face. "Madame Pratolungo," she remarked, "that is the first foolish thing you have said, since you have been here."

"Wait a little, my dear," I rejoined. "You have declared that nothing is known of this man. Now you mean by that--nothing which satisfies you. He has not dropped down from Heaven, I suppose? The time when he came here, must be known. Also, whether he came alone, or not. Also, how and where he has found a lodging in the village. Before I admit that my guess is completely wrong, I want to hear what general observation in Dimchurch has discovered on the subject of this gentleman. How long has he been here?"

Lucilla did not, at first, appear to be much interested in the purely practical

view of the question which I had just placed before her.

"He has been here a week," she answered carelessly.

"Did he come, as I came, over the hills?"

"Yes."

"With a guide, of course?"

Lucilla suddenly sat up in her chair.

"With his brother," she said. "His twin brother, Madame Pratolungo."

I sat up in my chair. The appearance of his twin-brother in the story was a complication in itself. Two criminals escaped from the Assizes, instead of one!

"How did they find their way here?" I asked next.

"Nobody knows."

"Where did they go to, when they got here?"

"To the Cross-Hands--the little public-house in the village. The landlord told Zillah he was perfectly astonished at the resemblance between them. It was impossible to know which was which--it was wonderful, even for twins. They arrived early in the day, when the tap-room was empty; and they had a long talk together in private. At the end of it, they rang for the landlord, and asked if he had a bed-room to let in the house. You must have seen for yourself that The Cross-Hands is a mere beer-shop. The landlord had a room that he could spare--a wretched place, not fit for a gentleman to sleep in. One of the brothers took the room for all that."

"What became of the other brother?"

"He went away the same day--very unwillingly. The parting between them was most affecting. The brother who spoke to us to-night insisted on it--or the other would have refused to leave him. They both shed tears----"

"They did worse than that," said old Zillah, re-entering the room at the moment. "I have made all the doors and windows fast, downstairs; he can't get in now, my dear, if he tries."

"What did they do that was worse than crying?" I inquired.

"Kissed each other!" said Zillah, with a look of profound disgust. "Two men! Foreigners, of course."

"Our man is no foreigner," I said. "Did they give themselves a name?"

"The landlord asked the one who stayed behind for his name," replied Lucilla. "He said it was 'Dubourg.'"

This confirmed me in my belief that I had guessed right. "Dubourg" is as common a name in my country as "Jones" or "Thompson" is in England--just the sort of feigned name that a man in difficulties would give among us. Was he a criminal countryman of mine? No! There had been nothing foreign in his accent when he spoke. Pure English--there could be no doubt of that. And yet he had given a French name. Had he deliberately insulted my nation? Yes! Not content with being stained by innumerable crimes, he had added to the list of his atrocities--he had insulted my nation!

"Well?" I resumed. "We have left this undetected ruffian deserted in the public-house. Is he there still?"

"Bless your heart!" cried the old nurse, "he is settled in the neighborhood. He has taken Browndown."

I turned to Lucilla. "Browndown belongs to Somebody," I said hazarding another guess. "Did Somebody let it without a reference?"

"Browndown belongs to a gentleman at Brighton," answered Lucilla. "And the gentleman was referred to a well-known name in London--one of the great City merchants. Here is the most provoking part of the whole mystery. The merchant said, 'I have known Mr. Dubourg from his childhood. He has reasons for wishing to live in the strictest retirement. I answer for his being an honorable man, to whom you can safely let your house. More than this I am not authorized to tell you.' My father knows the landlord of Browndown; and that is what the reference said to him, word for word. Isn't it provoking? The house was let for six months certain, the next day. It is wretchedly furnished. Mr. Dubourg has had several things that he wanted sent from Brighton. Besides the furniture, a packing-case from London arrived at the house to-day. It was so strongly nailed up that the carpenter had to be sent for to open it. He reports that the case was full of thin plates of gold and silver; and it was accompanied by a box of extraordinary tools, the use of

which was a mystery to the carpenter himself. Mr. Dubourg locked up these things in a room at the back of the house, and put the key in his pocket. He seemed to be pleased--he whistled a tune, and said, 'Now we shall do!' The landlady at the Cross-Hands is our authority for this. She does what little cooking he requires; and her daughter makes his bed, and so on. They go to him in the morning, and return to the inn in the evening. He has no servant with him. He is all by himself at night. Isn't it interesting? A mystery in real life. It baffles everybody."

"You must be very strange people, my dear," I said, "to make a mystery of such a plain case as this."

"Plain?" repeated Lucilla, in amazement.

"Certainly! The gold and silver plates, and the strange tools, and the living in retirement, and the sending the servants away at night--all point to the same conclusion. My guess is the right one. The man is an escaped criminal; and his form of crime is coining false money. He has been discovered at Exeter--he has escaped the officers of justice--and he is now going to begin again here. You can do as you please. If I happen to want change, I won't get it in this neighborhood."

Lucilla laid herself back in her chair again. I could see that she gave me up, in the matter of Mr. Dubourg, as a person willfully and incorrigibly wrong.

"A coiner of false money, recommended as an honorable man by one of the first merchants in London!" she exclaimed. "We do some very eccentric things in England, occasionally--but there is a limit to our national madness, Madame Pratolungo, and you have reached it. Shall we have some music?"

She spoke a little sharply. Mr. Dubourg was the hero of her romance. She resented--seriously resented--any attempt on my part to lower him in her estimation.

I persisted in my unfavorable opinion of him, nevertheless. The question between us (as I might have told her) was a question of believing, or not believing, in the merchant of London. To her mind, it was a sufficient guarantee of his integrity that he was a rich man. To my mind (speaking as a good Socialist), that very circumstance told dead against him. A capitalist is a robber of one sort, and a coiner is a robber of another sort. Whether the capitalist recommends the coiner, or the coiner the capitalist, is all one to me. In either case (to quote the language of an excellent English play) the

honest people are the soft easy cushions on which these knaves repose and fatten. It was on the tip of my tongue to put this large and liberal view of the subject to Lucilla. But (alas!) it was easy to see that the poor child was infected by the narrow prejudices of the class amid which she lived. How could I find it in my heart to run the risk of a disagreement between us on the first day? No--it was not to be done. I gave the nice pretty blind girl a kiss. And we went to the piano together. And I put off making a good Socialist of Lucilla till a more convenient opportunity.

We might as well have left the piano unopened. The music was a failure.

I played my best. From Mozart to Beethoven. From Beethoven to Schubert. From Schubert to Chopin. She listened with all the will in the world to be pleased. She thanked me again and again. She tried, at my invitation, to play herself; choosing the familiar compositions which she knew by ear. No! The abominable Dubourg, having got the uppermost place in her mind, kept it. She tried, and tried, and tried--and could do nothing. His voice was still in her ears--the only music which could possess itself of her attention that night. I took her place, and began to play again. She suddenly snatched my hands off the keys. "Is Zillah here?" she whispered. I told her Zillah had left the room. She laid her charming head on my shoulder, and sighed hysterically. "I can't help thinking of him," she burst out. "I am miserable for the first time in my life--no! I am happy for the first time in my life. Oh, what must you think of me! I don't know what I am talking about. Why did you encourage him to speak to us? I might never have heard his voice but for you." She lifted her head again with a little shiver, and composed herself. One of her hands wandered here and there over the keys of the piano, playing softly. "His charming voice!" she whispered dreamily while she played. "Oh, his charming voice!" She paused again. Her hand dropped from the piano, and took mine. "Is this love?" she said, half to herself, half to me.

My duty as a respectable woman lay clearly before me--my duty was to tell her a lie.

"It is nothing, my dear, but too much excitement and too much fatigue," I said. "To-morrow you shall be my young lady again. To-night you must be only my child. Come, and let me put you to bed."

She yielded with a weary sigh. Ah, how lovely she looked in her pretty night-dress, on her knees at the bed-side--the innocent, afflicted creature--saying her prayers!

I am, let me own, an equally headlong woman at loving and hating. When I

had left her for the night, I could hardly have felt more tenderly interested in her if she had been really a child of my own. You have met with people of my sort--unless you are a very forbidding person indeed--who have talked to you in the most confidential manner of all their private affairs, on meeting you in a railway carriage, or sitting next to you at a table-d'hôte. For myself, I believe I shall go on running up sudden friendships with strangers to my dying day. Infamous Dubourg! If I could have got into Browndown that night, I should have liked to have done to him what a Mexican maid of mine (at the Central American period of my career) did to her drunken husband--who was a kind of peddler, dealing in whips and sticks. She sewed him strongly up one night in the sheet, while he lay snoring off his liquor in bed; and then she took his whole stock-in-trade out of the corner of the room, and broke it on him, to the last article on sale, until he was beaten to a jelly from head to foot.

Not having this resource open to me, I sat myself down in my bedroom, to consider--if the matter of Dubourg went any further--what it was my business to do next.

I have already mentioned that Lucilla and I had idled away the whole afternoon, woman-like, in talking of ourselves. You will best understand what course my reflections took, if I here relate the chief particulars which Lucilla communicated to me, concerning her own singular position in her father's house.