

## CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH

Blind Love

LUCILLA was at the piano when I entered the sitting-room.

"I wanted you of all things," she said. "I have sent all over the house in search of you. Where have you been?"

I told her.

She sprang to her feet with a cry of delight.

"You have persuaded him to trust you--you have discovered everything. You only said 'I have been at Browndown'--and I heard it in your voice. Out with it! out with it!"

She never moved--she seemed hardly to breathe--while I was telling her all that had passed at the interview between Oscar and me. As soon as I had done, she got up in a violent hurry--flushed and eager--and made straight for her bedroom door.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I want my hat and my stick," she answered.

"You are going out?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Can you ask the question? To Browndown of course!"

I begged her to wait a moment, and hear a word or two that I had to say. It is, I suppose, almost needless to add that my object in speaking to her was to protest against the glaring impropriety of her paying a second visit, in one day, to a man who was a stranger to her. I declared, in the plainest terms, that such a proceeding would be sufficient, in the estimation of any civilized community, to put her reputation in peril. The result of my interference was curious and interesting in the extreme. It showed me that the virtue called

Modesty (I am not speaking of Decency, mind) is a virtue of purely artificial growth; and that the successful cultivation of it depends in the first instance, not on the influence of the tongue, but on the influence of the eye.

Suppose the case of an average young lady (conscious of feeling a first love) to whom I might have spoken in the sense that I have just mentioned--what would she have done?

She would assuredly have shown some natural and pretty confusion, and would, in all human probability, have changed color more or less while she was listening to me. Lucilla's charming face revealed but one expression--an expression of disappointment, slightly mixed perhaps with surprise. I believed her to be then, what I knew her to be afterwards, as pure a creature as ever walked the earth. And yet, of the natural and becoming confusion, of the little inevitable feminine changes of color which I had expected to see, not so much as a vestige appeared--and this, remember, in the case of a person of unusually sensitive and impulsive nature: quick, on the most trifling occasions, to feel and to express its feeling in no ordinary degree.

What did it mean?

It meant that here was one strange side shown to me of the terrible affliction that darkened her life. It meant that modesty is essentially the growth of our own consciousness of the eyes of others judging us--and that blindness is never bashful, for the one simple reason that blindness cannot see. The most modest girl in existence is bolder with her lover in the dark than in the light. The female model who "sits" for the first time in a drawing academy, and who shrinks from the ordeal, is persuaded, in the last resort, to enter the students' room by having a bandage bound over her eyes. My poor Lucilla had always the bandage over her eyes. My poor Lucilla was never to meet her lover in the light. She had grown up with the passions of a woman--and yet, she had never advanced beyond the fearless and primitive innocence of a child. Ah, if ever there was a sacred charge confided to any mortal creature, here surely was a sacred charge confided to Me! I could not endure to see the poor pretty blind face turned so insensibly towards mine, after such words as I had just said to her. She was standing within my reach. I took her by the arm, and made her sit on my knee. "My dear!" I said, very earnestly, "you must not go to him again to-day."

"I have got so much to say to him," she answered impatiently, "I want to tell him how deeply I feel for him, and how anxious I am to make his life a happier one if I can."

"My dear Lucilla! you can't say this to a young man. It is as good as telling him, in plain words, that you are fond of him!"

"I am fond of him."

"Hush! hush! Keep it to yourself, until you are sure that he is fond of you. It is the man's place, my love--not the woman's--to own the truth first in matters of this sort."

"That is very hard on the women. If they feel it first, they ought to own it first." She paused for a moment, considering with herself--and abruptly got off my knee. "I must speak to him!" she burst out. "I must tell him that I have heard his story, and that I think all the better of him after it, instead of the worse!"

She was again on her way to get her hat. My only chance of stopping her was to invent a compromise.

"Write him a note," I said--and then suddenly remembered that she was blind. "You shall dictate," I added; "and I will hold the pen. Be content with that for to-day. For my sake, Lucilla!"

She yielded--not very willingly, poor thing. But she jealously declined to let me hold the pen.

"My first note to him must be all written by me," she said. "I can write--in my own roundabout way. It's long and tiresome; but still I can do it. Come and see."

She led the way to a writing-table in a corner of the room, and sat for awhile with the pen in her hand, thinking. Her irresistible smile broke suddenly like a glow of light over her "Ah!" she exclaimed, "I know how to tell him what I think."

Guiding the pen in her right hand with the fingers of her left she wrote slowly, in large childish characters, these words:--"DEAR MR. OSCAR,--I have heard all about you. Please send the little gold vase.--Your friend, LUCILLA."

She enclosed and directed the letter, and clapped her hands for joy. "He will know what that means!" she said gaily.

It was useless to attempt making a second remonstrance. I rang the bell,

under protest (imagine her receiving a present from a gentleman to whom she had spoken for the first time that morning!)--and the groom was sent off to Browndown with the letter. In making this concession, I privately said to myself, "I shall keep a tight hand over Oscar; he is the manageable person of the two!"

The interval before the return of the groom was not an easy interval to fill up. I proposed some music. Lucilla was still too full of her new interest to be able to give her attention to anything else. She suddenly remembered that her father and her step-mother ought both to be informed that Mr. Dubourg was a perfectly presentable person at the rectory: she decided on writing to her father.

On this occasion, she made no difficulty about permitting me to hold the pen, while she told me what to write. We produced between us rather a flighty, enthusiastic, high-flown sort of letter. I felt by no means sure that we should raise a favorable impression of our new neighbor in the mind of Reverend Finch. That was, however, not my affair. I appeared to excellent advantage in the matter, as the judicious foreign lady who had insisted on making inquiries. For the rest, it was a point of honor with me--writing for a person who was blind--not to change a single word in the sentences which Lucilla dictated to me. The letter completed, I wrote the address of the house in Brighton at which Mr. Finch then happened to be staying; and I was next about to close the envelope in due course--when Lucilla stopped me.

"Wait a little," she said. "Don't close the letter yet."

I wondered why the envelope was to be left open, and why Lucilla looked a little confused when she forbade me to close it. Another unexpected revelation of the influence of their affliction on the natures of the blind, was waiting to enlighten me on those two points.

After consultation between us, it had been decided, at Lucilla's express request, that I should inform Mrs. Finch that the mystery at Browndown was now cleared up. Lucilla openly owned to having no great relish for the society of her step-mother, or for the duty invariably devolving on anybody who was long in the company of that fertile lady, of either finding her handkerchief or holding her baby. A duplicate key of the door of communication between the two sides of the house was given to me; and I left the room.

Before performing my errand, I went for a minute into my bedchamber to put away my hat and parasol. Returning into the corridor, and passing the

door of the sitting-room, I found that it had been left ajar by some one who had entered after I had left; and I heard Lucilla's voice say, "Take that letter out of the envelope, and read it to me."

I pursued my way along the passage--very slowly, I own--and I heard the first sentences of the letter which I had written under Lucilla's dictation, read aloud to her in the old nurse's voice. The incurable suspicion of the blind--always abandoned to the same melancholy distrust of the persons about them; always doubting whether some deceit is not being practiced on them by the happy people who can see--had urged Lucilla, even in the trifling matter of the letter, to put me to the test, behind my back. She was using Zillah's eyes to make sure that I had really written all that she had dictated to me--exactly as, on many an after occasion, she used my eyes to make sure of Zillah's complete performance of tasks allotted to her in the house. No experience of the faithful devotion of those who live with them ever thoroughly satisfies the blind. Ah, poor things, always in the dark! always in the dark!

In opening the door of communication, it appeared as if I had also opened all the doors of all the bedchambers in the rectory. The moment I stepped into the passage, out popped the children from one room after another, like rabbits out of their burrows.

"Where is your mamma?" I asked.

The rabbits answered by one universal shriek, and popped back again into their burrows.

I went down the stairs to try my luck on the ground floor. The window on the landing had a view over the front garden. I looked out, and saw the irrepressible Arab of the family, our small chubby Jicks, wandering in the garden, all by herself; evidently on the watch for her next opportunity of escaping from the house. This curious little creature cared nothing for the society of the other children. Indoors, she sat gravely retired in corners, taking her meals (whenever she could) on the floor. Out of doors, she roamed till she could walk no longer, and then lay down anywhere, like a little animal, to sleep. She happened to look up as I stood at the window. Seeing me, she waved her hand indicatively in the direction of the rectory gate. "What is it?" I asked. The Arab answered, "Jicks wants to get out."

At the same moment, the screaming of a baby below, informed me that I was in the near neighborhood of Mrs. Finch.

I advanced towards the noise, and found myself standing before the open door of a large store-room at the extreme end of the passage. In the middle of the room (issuing household commodities to the cook) sat Mrs. Finch. She was robed this time in a petticoat and a shawl; and she had the baby and the novel laid together flat on their backs in her lap.

"Eight pounds of soap? Where does it all go to I wonder!" groaned Mrs. Finch to the accompaniment of the baby's screams. "Five pounds of soda for the laundry? One would think we did the washing for the whole village. Six pounds of candles? You must eat candles, like the Russians: who ever heard of burning six pounds of candles in a week? Ten pounds of sugar? Who gets it all? I never taste sugar from one year's end to another. Waste, nothing but waste." Here Mrs. Finch looked my way, and saw me at the door. "Oh? Madame Pratolungo? How d'ye do? Don't go away--I've just done. A bottle of blacking? My shoes are a disgrace to the house. Five pounds of rice? If I had Indian servants, five pounds of rice would last them for a year. There! take the things away into the kitchen. Excuse my dress, Madame Pratolungo. How am I to dress, with all I have got to do? What do you say? My time must indeed be fully occupied? Ah, that's just where it is! When you have lost half an hour in the morning, and can't pick it up again--to say nothing of having the store-room on your mind, and the children's dinner late, and the baby fractious--one slips on a petticoat and a shawl, and gives it up in despair. What can I have done with my handkerchief? Would you mind looking among those bottles behind you? Oh, here it is, under the baby. Might I trouble you to hold my book for one moment? I think the baby will be quieter if I put him the other way." Here Mrs. Finch turned the baby over on his stomach, and patted him briskly on the back. At this change in his circumstances, the unappeasable infant only roared louder than ever. His mother appeared to be perfectly unaffected by the noise. This resigned domestic martyr looked placidly up at me, as I stood before her, bewildered, with the novel in my hand. "Ah, that's a very interesting story," she went on. "Plenty of love in it, you know. You have come for it, haven't you? I remember I promised to lend it to you yesterday." Before I could answer the cook appeared again, in search of more household commodities. Mrs. Finch repeated the woman's demands, one by one as she made them, in tones of despair. "Another bottle of vinegar? I believe you water the garden with vinegar! More starch? The Queen's washing, I'm firmly persuaded, doesn't come to so much as ours. Sandpaper? Sandpaper means wastepaper in this profligate house. I shall tell your master. I really can NOT make the housekeeping money last at this rate. Don't go, Madame Pratolungo! I shall have done directly. What! You must go! Oh, then, put the book back on my lap, please--and look behind that sack of flour. The first volume slipped down there this morning, and I haven't had time to pick it up since.

(Sandpaper! Do you think I'm made of sandpaper!) Have you found the first volume? Ah, that's it. All over flour! there's a hole in the sack I suppose. Twelve sheets of sandpaper used in a week! What for? I defy any of you to tell me what for. Waste! waste! shameful sinful waste!" At this point in Mrs. Finch's lamentations, I made my escape with the book, and left the subject of Oscar Dubourg to be introduced at a fitter opportunity. The last words I heard, through the screams of the baby, as I ascended the stairs, were words still relating to the week's prodigal consumption of sandpaper. Let us drop a tear, if you please, over the woes of Mrs. Finch, and leave the British matron apostrophizing domestic economy in the odorous seclusion of her own storeroom.

I had just related to Lucilla the failure of my expedition to the other side of the house, when the groom returned, bringing with him the gold vase, and a letter.

Oscar's answer was judiciously modeled to imitate the brevity of Lucilla's note. "You have made me a happy man again. When may I follow the vase?" There, in two sentences, was the whole letter.

I had another discussion with Lucilla, relating to the propriety of our receiving Oscar in Reverend Finch's absence. It was only possible to persuade her to wait until she had at least heard from her father, by consenting to take another walk towards Browndown the next morning. This new concession satisfied her. She had received his present; she had exchanged letters with him--that was enough to content her for the time.

"Do you think he is getting fond of me?" she asked, the last thing at night; taking her gold vase to bed with her, poor dear--exactly as she might have taken a new toy to bed with her when she was a child. "Give him time, my love," I answered. "It isn't everybody who can travel at your pace in such a serious matter as this." My banter had no effect upon her. "Go away with your candle," she said. "The darkness makes no difference to me. I can see him in my thoughts." She nestled her head comfortably on the pillows, and tapped me saucily on the cheek, as I bent over her. "Own the advantage I have over you now," she said. "You can't see at night without your candle. I could go all over the house, at this moment, without making a false step anywhere."

When I left her that night, I sincerely believe "poor Miss Finch" was the happiest woman in England.