

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH

Mr. Finch smells Money

A DOMESTIC alarm deferred for some hours our proposed walk to Browndown.

The old nurse, Zillah, was taken ill in the night. She was so little relieved by such remedies as we were able to apply, that it became necessary to summon the doctor in the morning. He lived at some distance from Dimchurch; and he had to send back to his own house for the medicines required. As a necessary result of these delays, it was close on one o'clock in the afternoon before the medical remedies had their effect, and the nurse was sufficiently recovered to permit of our leaving her in the servant's care.

We had dressed for our walk (Lucilla being ready long before I was), and had got as far as the garden gate on our way to Browndown--when we heard, on the other side of the wall, a man's voice, pitched in superbly deep bass tones, pronouncing these words:

"Believe me, my dear sir, there is not the least difficulty. I have only to send the cheque to my bankers at Brighton."

Lucilla started, and caught hold of me by the arm.

"My father!" she exclaimed in the utmost astonishment. "Who is he talking to?"

The key of the gate was in my possession. "What a grand voice your father has got!" I said, as I took the key out of my pocket. I opened the gate. There, confronting us on the threshold, arm in arm, as if they had known each other from childhood, stood Lucilla's father, and--Oscar Dubourg!

Reverend Finch opened the proceedings by folding his daughter affectionately in his arms.

"My dear child!" he said, "I received your letter--your most interesting letter--this morning. The moment I read it I felt that I owed a duty to Mr. Dubourg. As pastor of Dimchurch, it was clearly incumbent on me to comfort a brother in affliction. I really felt, so to speak, a longing to hold out the right hand of friendship to this sorely-tried man. I borrowed my friend's carriage,

and drove straight to Browndown. We have had a long and cordial talk. I have brought Mr. Dubourg home with me. He must be one of us. My dear child, Mr. Dubourg must be one of us. Let me introduce you. My eldest daughter--Mr. Dubourg."

He performed the ceremony of presentation, with the most impenetrable gravity, as if he really believed that Oscar and his daughter now met each other for the first time!

Never had I set my eyes on a meaner-looking man than this rector. In height he barely reached up to my shoulder. In substance, he was so miserably lean that he looked the living picture of starvation. He would have made his fortune in the streets of London, if he had only gone out and shown himself to the public in ragged clothes. His face was deeply pitted with the small-pox. His short grisly hair stood up stiff and straight on his head like hair fixed in a broom. His small whitish-grey eyes had a restless, inquisitive, hungry look in them, indescribably irritating and uncomfortable to see. The one personal distinction he possessed consisted in his magnificent bass voice--a voice which had no sort of right to exist in the person who used it. Until one became accustomed to the contrast, there was something perfectly unbearable in hearing those superb big tones come out of that contemptible little body. The famous Latin phrase conveys, after all, the best description I can give of Reverend Finch. He was in very truth--Voice, and nothing else.

"Madame Pratolungo, no doubt?" he went on, turning to me. "Delighted to make the acquaintance of my daughter's judicious companion and friend. You must be one of us--like Mr. Dubourg. Let me introduce you. Madame Pratolungo--Mr. Dubourg. This is the old side of the rectory, my dear sir. We had it put in repair--let me see: how long since?--we had it put in repair just after Mrs. Finch's last confinement but one." (I soon discovered that Mr. Finch reckoned time by his wife's confinements.) "You will find it very curious and interesting inside. Lucilla, my child! (It has pleased Providence, Mr. Dubourg, to afflict my daughter with blindness. Inscrutable Providence!) Lucilla, this is your side of the house. Take Mr. Dubourg's arm, and lead the way. Do the honors, my child. Madame Pratolungo, let me offer you my arm. I regret that I was not present, when you arrived, to welcome you at the rectory. Consider yourself--do pray consider yourself--one of us." He stopped, and lowered his prodigious voice to a confidential growl. "Delightful person, Mr. Dubourg. I can't tell you how pleased I am with him. And what a sad story! Cultivate Mr. Dubourg, my dear madam. As a favor to Me--cultivate Mr. Dubourg!"

He said this with an appearance of the deepest anxiety--and more, he

emphasized it by affectionately squeezing my hand.

I have met with a great many audacious people in my time. But the audacity of Reverend Finch--persisting to our faces in the assumption that he had been the first to discover our neighbor, and that Lucilla and I were perfectly incapable of understanding and appreciating Oscar, unassisted by him--was entirely without a parallel in my experience. I asked myself what his conduct in this matter--so entirely unexpected by Lucilla, as well as by me--could possibly mean. My knowledge of his character, obtained through his daughter, and my memory of what we heard him say on the other side of the wall, suggested that his conduct might mean--Money.

We assembled in the sitting-room.

The only person among us who was quite at his ease was Mr. Finch. He never let his daughter and his guest alone for a single moment. "My child, show Mr. Dubourg this; show Mr. Dubourg that. Mr. Dubourg, my daughter possesses this; my daughter possesses that." So he went on, all round the room. Oscar appeared to feel a little daunted by the overwhelming attentions of his new friend. Lucilla was, as I could see, secretly irritated at finding herself authorized by her father to pay those attentions to Oscar which she would have preferred offering to him of her own accord. As for me, I was already beginning to weary of the patronizing politeness of the little priest with the big voice. It was a relief to us all, when a message on domestic affairs arrived in the midst of the proceedings from Mrs. Finch, requesting to see her husband immediately on the rectory side of the house.

Forced to leave us, Reverend Finch made his farewell speech; taking Oscar's hand into a kind of paternal custody in both his own hands. He spoke with such sonorous cordiality, that the china and glass ornaments on Lucilla's chiffonier actually jingled an accompaniment to his booming bass notes.

"Come to tea, my dear sir. Without ceremony. To-night at six. We must keep up your spirits, Mr. Dubourg. Cheerful society, and a little music. Lucilla, my dear child, you will play for Mr. Dubourg, won't you? Madame Pratolungo will do the same--at My request--I am sure. We shall make even dull Dimchurch agreeable to our new neighbor before we have done. What does the poet say? 'Fixed to no spot is happiness sincere; 'tis nowhere to be found, or everywhere.' How cheering! how true! Good day; good day."

The glasses left off jingling. Mr. Finch's wizen little legs took him out of the room.

The moment his back was turned, we both assailed Oscar with the same question. What had passed at the interview between the rector and himself? Men are all alike incompetent to satisfy women, when the question between the sexes is a question of small details. A woman, in Oscar's position, would have been able to relate to us, not only the whole conversation with the rector, but every little trifling incident which had noticeably illustrated it. As things were, we could only extract from our unsatisfactory man the barest outline of the interview. The coloring and the filling-in we were left to do for ourselves.

Oscar had, on his own confession, acknowledged his visitor's kindness, by opening his whole heart to the sympathizing rector, and placing that wary priest and excellent man of business in possession of the completest knowledge of all his affairs. In return, Reverend Finch had spoken in the frankest manner, on his side. He had drawn a sad picture of the poverty-stricken condition of Dimchurch, viewed as an ecclesiastical endowment; and he had spoken in such feeling terms of the neglected condition of the ancient and interesting church, that poor simple Oscar, smitten with pity, had produced his cheque-book, and had subscribed on the spot towards the Fund for repairing the ancient round tower. They had been still occupied with the subject of the tower and the subscription, when we had opened the garden gate and had let them in. Hearing this, I now understood the motives under which our reverend friend was acting as well as if they had been my own. It was plain to my mind that the rector had taken his financial measure of Oscar, and had privately satisfied himself, that if he encouraged the two young people in cultivating each other's society, money (to use his own phrase) might come of it. He had, as I believed, put forward "the round tower," in the first instance, as a feeler; and he would follow it up, in due time, by an appeal of a more personal nature to Oscar's well-filled purse. Brief, he was, in my opinion, quite sharp enough (after having studied his young friend's character) to foresee an addition to his income, rather than a subtraction from it, if the relations between Oscar and his daughter ended in a marriage.

Whether Lucilla arrived, on her side, at the same conclusion as mine, is what I cannot venture positively to declare. I can only relate that she looked ill at ease as the facts came out; and that she took the first opportunity of extinguishing her father, viewed as a topic of conversation.

As for Oscar, it was enough for him that he had already secured his place as friend of the house. He took leave of us in the highest spirits. I had my eye on them when he and Lucilla said good-bye. She squeezed his hand. I saw her do it. At the rate at which things were now going on, I began to ask

myself whether Reverend Finch would not appear at tea-time in his robes of office, and celebrate the marriage of his "sorely-trying" young friend between the first cup and the second.

At our little social assembly in the evening, nothing passed worthy of much remark.

Lucilla and I (I cannot resist recording this) were both beautifully dressed, in honor of the occasion; Mrs. Finch serving us to perfection, by way of contrast. She had made an immense effort--she was half dressed. Her evening costume was an ancient green silk skirt (with traces of past babies visible on it to an experienced eye), topped by the everlasting blue merino jacket. "I lose everything belonging to me," Mrs. Finch whispered in my ear. "I have got a body to this dress, and it can't be found anywhere." The rector's prodigious voice was never silent: the pompous and plausible little man talked, talked, talked, in deeper and deeper bass, until the very teacups on the table shuddered under the influence of him. The elder children, admitted to the family festival, ate till they could eat no more; stared till they could stare no more; yawned till they could yawn no more--and then went to bed. Oscar got on well with everybody. Mrs. Finch was naturally interested in him as one of twins--though she was also surprised and disappointed at hearing that his mother had begun and ended with his brother and himself. As for Lucilla, she sat in silent happiness, absorbed in the inexhaustible delight of hearing Oscar's voice. She found as many varieties of expression in listening to her beloved tones, as the rest of us find in looking at our beloved face. We had music later in the evening--and I then heard, for the first time, how charmingly Lucilla played. She was a born musician, with a delicacy and subtlety of touch such as few even of the greatest virtuosi possess. Oscar was enchanted. In a word, the evening was a success.

I contrived, when our guest took his departure, to say my contemplated word to him in private, on the subject of his solitary position at Browndown.

Those doubts of Oscar's security in his lonely house, which I have described as having been suggested to me by the discovery of the two ruffians lurking under the wall, still maintained their place in my mind; and still urged me to warn him to take precautions of some sort, before the precious metals which he had sent to London to be melted, came back to him again. He gave me the opportunity I wanted, by looking at his watch, and apologizing for protracting his visit to a terribly late hour, for the country--the hour of midnight.

"Is your servant sitting up for you?" I asked, assuming to be ignorant of his domestic arrangements.

He pulled out of his pocket a great clumsy key.

"This is my only servant at Browndown," he said. "By four or five in the afternoon, the people at the inn have done all for me that I want. After that time, there is nobody in the house but myself."

He shook hands with us. The rector escorted him as far as the front door. I slipped out while they were saying their last words, and joined Oscar, when he advanced alone into the garden.

"I want a breath of fresh air," I said. "I'll go with you as far as the gate."

He began to talk of Lucilla directly. I surprised him by returning abruptly to the subject of his position at Browndown.

"Do you think it's wise," I asked, "to be all by yourself at night in such a lonely house as yours? Why don't you have a manservant?"

"I detest strange servants," he answered. "I infinitely prefer being by myself."

"When do you expect your gold and silver plates to be returned to you?"

"In about a week."

"What would be the value of them, in money--at a rough guess?"

"At a rough guess--about seventy or eighty pounds."

"In a week's time then," I said, "you will have seventy or eighty pounds' worth of property at Browndown. Property which a thief need only put into the melting-pot, to have no fear of its being traced into his hands."

Oscar stopped, and looked at me.

"What can you be thinking of!" he asked. "There are no thieves in this primitive place."

"There are thieves in other places," I answered. "And they may come here. Have you forgotten those two men whom we caught hanging about Browndown yesterday?"

He smiled. I had recalled to him a humorous association--nothing more.

"It was not we who caught them," he said. "It was that strange child. What do you say to my having Jicks to sleep in the house and take care of me?"

"I am not joking," I rejoined. "I never met with two more ill-looking villains in my life. The window was open when you were telling me about the necessity for melting the plates again. They may know as well as we do, that your gold and silver will be returned to you after a time."

"What an imagination you have got!" he exclaimed. "You see a couple of shabby excursionists from Brighton, who have wandered to Dimchurch--and you instantly transform them into a pair of housebreakers in a conspiracy to rob and murder me! You and my brother Nugent would just suit each other. His imagination runs away with him, exactly like yours."

"Take my advice," I answered gravely. "Don't persist in sleeping at Browndown without a living creature in the house with you."

He was in wild good spirits. He kissed my hand, and thanked me in his voluble exaggerated way for the interest that I took in him. "All right!" he said, as he opened the gate. "I'll have a living creature in the house with me. I'll get a dog."

We parted. I had told him what was on my mind. I could do no more. After all, it might be quite possible that his view was the right one, and mine the wrong.