CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

Discoveries at Browndown

IT is needless to tell you at what conclusion I arrived, as soon as I was sufficiently myself to think at all.

Thanks to my adventurous past life, I have got the habit of deciding quickly in serious emergencies of all sorts. In the present emergency--as I saw it--there were two things to be done. One, to go instantly with help to Browndown: the other, to keep the knowledge of what had happened from Lucilla until I could get back again, and prepare her for the discovery.

I looked at Mrs. Finch. She had dropped helplessly into a chair. "Rouse yourself!" I said--and shook her. It was no time for sympathizing with swoons and hysterics. The child was still in my arms; fast yielding, poor little thing, to the exhaustion of fatigue and terror. I could do nothing until I had relieved myself of the charge of her. Mrs. Finch looked up at me, trembling and sobbing. I put the child in her lap. Jicks feebly resisted being parted from me; but soon gave up, and dropped her weary little head on her mother's bosom. "Can you take off her frock?" I asked, with another shake--a good one, this time. The prospect of a domestic occupation (of any sort) appeared to rouse Mrs. Finch. She looked at the baby, in its cradle in one corner of the room, and at the novel, reposing on a chair in another corner of the room. The presence of these two familiar objects appeared to encourage her. She shivered, she swallowed a sob, she recovered her breath, she began to undo the frock.

"Put it away carefully," I said; "and say nothing to anybody of what has happened, until I come back. You can see for yourself that the child is not hurt. Soothe her, and wait here. Is Mr. Finch in the study?"

Mrs. Finch swallowed another sob, and said, "Yes." The child made a last effort. "Jicks will go with you," said the indomitable little Arab faintly. I ran out of the room, and left the three babies--big, little, and least--together.

After knocking at the study door without getting any reply, I opened it and went in. Reverend Finch, comfortably prostrate in a large arm-chair (with his sermon-paper spread out in fair white sheets by his side), started up, and confronted me in the character of a clergyman that moment awakened from a sound sleep.

The rector of Dimchurch instantly recovered his dignity.

"I beg your pardon, Madame Pratolungo, I was deep in thought. Please state your business briefly." Saying those words, he waved his hand magnificently over his empty sheets of paper, and added in his deepest bass: "Sermon-day."

I told him in the plainest words what I had seen on his child's frock, and what I feared had happened at Browndown. He turned deadly pale. If I ever yet set my two eyes on a man thoroughly frightened, Reverend Finch was that man.

"Do you anticipate danger?" he inquired. "Is it your opinion that criminal persons are in, or near, the house?"

"It is my opinion that there is not a moment to be lost," I answered. "We must go to Browndown; and we must get what help we can on the way."

I opened the door, and waited for him to come out with me. Mr. Finch (still apparently pre-occupied with the question of the criminal persons) looked as if he wished himself a hundred miles from his own rectory at that particular moment. But he was the master of the house; he was the principal man in the place--he had no other alternative, as matters now stood, than to take his hat and go.

We went out together into the village. My reverend companion was silent for the first time in my limited experience of him. We inquired for the one policeman who patrolled the district. He was away on his rounds. We asked if anybody had seen the doctor. No: it was not the doctor's day for visiting Dimchurch. I had heard the landlord of the Gross Hands described as a capable and respectable man; and I suggested stopping at the inn, and taking him with us. Mr. Finch instantly brightened at that proposal. His sense of his own importance rose again, like the mercury in a thermometer when you put it into a warm bath.

"Exactly what I was about to suggest," he said. "Gootheridge of the Gross Hands is a very worthy person--for his station in life. Let us have Gootheridge, by all means. Don't be alarmed, Madame Pratolungo. We are all in the hands of Providence. It is most fortunate for you that I was at home. What would you have done without me? Now don't, pray don't, be alarmed. In case of criminal persons--I have my stick, as you see. I am not tall; but I possess immense physical strength. I am, so to speak, all muscle.

Feel!"

He held out one of his wizen little arms. It was about half the size of my arm. If I had not been far too anxious to think of playing tricks, I should certainly have declared that it was needless, with such a tower of strength by my side, to disturb the landlord. I dare not assert that Mr. Finch actually detected the turn my thoughts were taking--I can only declare that he did certainly shout for Gootheridge in a violent hurry, the moment we were in sight of the inn.

The landlord came out; and, hearing what our errand was, instantly consented to join us.

"Take your gun," said Mr. Finch.

Gootheridge took his gun. We hastened on to the house.

"Were Mrs. Gootheridge or your daughter at Browndown today?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am--they were both at Browndown. They finished up their work as usual--and left the house more than an hour since."

"Did anything out of the common happen while they were there?"

"Nothing that I heard of, ma'am."

I considered with myself for a minute, and ventured on putting a few more questions to Mr. Gootheridge.

"Have any strangers been seen here this evening?" I inquired.

"Yes, ma'am. Nearly an hour ago two strangers drove by my house in a chaise."

"In what direction?"

"Coming from Brighton way, and going towards Browndown."

"Did you notice the men?"

"Not particularly, ma'am. I was busy at the time."

A sickening suspicion that the two strangers in the chaise might be the two

men whom I had seen lurking under the wall, forced its way into my mind. I said no more until we reached the house.

All was quiet. The one sign of anything unusual was in the plain traces of the passage of wheels over the turf in front of Browndown. The landlord was the first to see them. "The chaise must have stopped at the house, sir," he said, addressing himself to the rector.

Reverend Finch was suffering under a second suspension of speech. All he could say as we approached the door of the silent and solitary building--and he said that with extreme difficulty--was, "Pray let us be careful!"

The landlord was the first to reach the door. I was behind him. The rector--at some little distance--acted as rear-guard, with the South Downs behind him to retreat upon. Gootheridge rapped smartly on the door, and called out, "Mr. Dubourg!" There was no answer. There was only a dreadful silence. The suspense was more than I could endure. I pushed by the landlord, and turned the handle of the unlocked door.

"Let me go first, ma'am," said Gootheridge.

He pushed by me, in his turn. I followed him close. We entered the house, and called again. Again there was no answer. We looked into the little sitting-room on one side of the passage, and into the dining-room on the other. Both were empty. We went on to the back of the house, where the room was situated which Oscar called his workshop. When we tried the door of the workshop it was locked.

We knocked, and called again. The horrid silence was all that followed--as before.

I tried the keyhole with my finger. The key was not in the lock. I knelt down, and looked through the keyhole. The next instant, I was up again on my feet, wild and giddy with horror.

"Burst open the door!" I screamed. "I can just see his hand lying on the floor!"

The landlord, like the rector, was a little man; and the door, like everything else at Browndown, was of the clumsiest and heaviest construction. Unaided by instruments, we should all three together have been too weak to burst it open. In this difficulty, Reverend Finch proved to be--for the first time, and also for the last--of some use.

"Stay!" he said. "My friends, if the back garden gate is open, we can get in by the window."

Neither the landlord nor I had thought of the window. We ran round to the back of the house; seeing the marks of the chaise-wheels leading in the same direction. The gate in the wall was wide open. We crossed the little garden. The window of the workshop--opening to the ground--gave us admission as the rector had foretold. We entered the room.

There he lay--poor harmless, unlucky Oscar--senseless, in a pool of his own blood. A blow on the left side of his head had, to all appearance, felled him on the spot. The wound had split the scalp. Whether it had also split the skull was more than I was surgeon enough to be able to say. I had gathered some experience of how to deal with wounded men, when I served the sacred cause of Freedom with my glorious Pratolungo. Cold water, vinegar, and linen for bandages--these were all in the house; and these I called for. Gootheridge found the key of the door flung aside in a corner of the room. He got the water and the vinegar, while I ran up-stairs to Oscar's bedroom, and provided myself with some of his handkerchiefs. In a few minutes, I had a cold water bandage over the wound, and was bathing his face in vinegar and water. He was still insensible; but he lived. Reverend Finch--not of the slightest help to anybody--assumed the duty of feeling Oscar's pulse. He did it as if, under the circumstances, this was the one meritorious action that could be performed. He looked as if nobody could feel a pulse but himself. "Most fortunate," he said, counting the slow, faint throbbing at the poor fellow's wrist--"most fortunate that I was at home. What would you have done without me?"

The next necessity was, of course, to send for the doctor, and to get help, in the meantime, to carry Oscar up-stairs to his bed.

Gootheridge volunteered to borrow a horse, and to ride off for the doctor. We arranged that he was to send his wife and his wife's brother to help me. This settled, the one last embarrassment left to deal with, was the embarrassment of Mr. Finch. Now that we were free from all fear of encountering bad characters in the house, the boom-boom of the little man's big voice went on unintermittingly, like a machine at work in the neighborhood. I had another of my inspirations--sitting on the floor with Oscar's head on my lap. I gave my reverend companion something to do. "Look about the room!" I said. "See if the packing-case with the gold and silver plates is here or not."

Mr. Finch did not quite relish being treated like an ordinary mortal, and being told what he was to do.

"Compose yourself, Madame Pratolungo," he said. "No hysterical activity, if you please. This business is in My hands. Quite needless, ma'am, to tell Me to look for the packing-case."

"Quite needless," I agreed. "I know beforehand the packing-case is gone."

That answer instantly set him fussing about the room. Not a sign of the case was to be seen.

All doubt in my mind was at an end now. The two ruffians lounging against the wall had justified, horribly justified, my worst suspicions of them.

On the arrival of Mrs. Gootheridge and her brother, we carried him up to his room. We laid him on the bed, with his neck-tie off, and his throat free, and the air blowing over him from the open window. He showed no sign yet of coming to his senses. But still the pulse went faintly on. No change was discernible for the worse.

It was useless to hope for the doctor's arrival, before another hour at least. I felt the necessity of getting back at once to the rectory, so as to be able to tell Lucilla (with all needful preparation) the melancholy truth. Otherwise, the news of what had happened would get abroad in the village, and might come to her ears, in the worst possible way, through one of the servants. To my infinite relief, Mr. Finch, when I rose to go, excused himself from accompanying me. He had discovered that it was his duty, as rector, to give the earliest information of the outrage at Browndown to the legal authorities. He went his way to the nearest magistrate. And I went mine--leaving Oscar under the care of Mrs. Gootheridge and her brother--back to the house. Mr. Finch's last words at parting reminded me, once more, that we had one thing at least to be thankful for under the circumstances--sad as they otherwise were.

"Most fortunate, Madame Pratolungo, that I was at home. What would you have done without me?"