

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH

Events at the Bedside

I AM, if you will be so good as to remember, constitutionally French--and, therefore, constitutionally averse to distressing myself, if I can possibly help it. For this reason, I really cannot summon courage to describe what passed between my blind Lucilla and me when I returned to our pretty sitting-room. She made me cry at the time; and she would make me (and perhaps you) cry again now, if I wrote the little melancholy story of what this tender young creature suffered when I told her my miserable news. I won't write it; I am dead against tears. They affect the nose; and my nose is my best feature. Let us use our eyes, my fair friends, to conquer, not to cry.

Be it enough to say, that when I went back to Browndown, Lucilla went with me.

I now observed her, for the first time, to be jealous of the eyes of us happy people who could see. The instant she entered, she insisted on being near enough to the bed, to hear us, or to touch us, as we waited on the injured man. This was at once followed by her taking the place occupied by Mrs. Gootheridge at the bed-head, and herself bathing Oscar's face and forehead. She was even jealous of me, when she discovered that I was moistening the bandages on the wound. I irritated her into boldly kissing the poor insensible face in our presence! The landlady of the Cross Hands was one of my sort: she took cheerful views of things. "Sweet on him--eh, ma'am?" she whispered in my ear; "we shall have a wedding in Dimchurch." In presence of these kissings and whisperings, Mrs. Gootheridge's brother, as the only man present, began to look very uncomfortable. This worthy creature belonged to that large and respectable order of Englishmen, who don't know what to do with their hands, or how to get out of a room. I took pity on him--he was, I assure you, a fine man. "Smoke your pipe, sir, in the garden," I said. "We will call to you from the window, if we want you up here." Mrs. Gootheridge's brother cast on me one look of unutterable gratitude--and escaped, as if he had been let out of a trap.

At last, the doctor came.

His first words were an indescribable relief to us. The skull of our poor Oscar was not injured. There was concussion of the brain, and there was a scalp-wound--inflicted evidently with a blunt instrument. As to the wound, I

had done all that was necessary in the doctor's absence. As to the injury to the brain, time and care would put everything right again. "Make your minds easy, ladies," said this angel of a man. "There is no reason for feeling the slightest alarm about him."

He came to his senses--that is to say, he opened his eyes and looked vacantly about him--between four and five hours after the time when we had found him on the floor of the workshop.

His mind, poor fellow, was still all astray. He recognized nobody. He imitated the action of writing with his finger; and said very earnestly, over and over again, "Go home, Jicks; go home, go home!" fancying himself (as I suppose), lying helpless on the floor, and sending the child back to us to give the alarm. Later in the night he fell asleep. All through the next day, he still wandered in his mind when he spoke. It was not till the day after, that he began feebly to recover his reason. The first person he recognized was Lucilla. She was engaged at the moment in brushing his beautiful chestnut hair. To her unutterable joy, he patted her hand, and murmured her name.

She bent over him; and, under cover of the hair-brush, whispered something in his ear which made the young fellow's pale face flush, and his dull eyes brighten with pleasure. A day or two afterwards, she owned to me that she had said, "Get well, for my sake." She was not in the least ashamed of having spoken to that plain purpose. On the contrary, she triumphed in it. "Leave him to me," said Lucilla, in the most positive manner. "I mean first to cure him. And then I mean to be his wife."

In a week more, he was in complete possession of his faculties--but still wretchedly weak, and only gaining ground very slowly after the shock that he had suffered.

He was now able to tell us, by a little at a time, of what had happened in the workshop.

After Mrs. Gootheridge and her daughter had quitted the house at their usual hour, he had gone up to his room; had remained there some little time; and had then gone downstairs again. On approaching the workshop, he heard voices talking in whispers in the room. The idea instantly occurred to him that something was wrong. He softly tried the door, and found it locked--the robbers having no doubt taken that precaution, to prevent their being surprised at their thieving work by any person in the house. The one other way of getting into the room, was the way that we had tried. He went round to the back garden, and found an empty chaise drawn up outside the

door. This circumstance thoroughly puzzled him. But for the mysterious locking of the workshop door, it would have suggested to him nothing more alarming than the arrival of some unexpected visitors. Eager to solve the mystery, he crossed the garden; and, entering the room, found himself face to face with the same two men whom Jicks had discovered ten days previously lounging against the wall.

As he approached the window, they were both busily engaged, with their backs towards him, in cording up the packing-case which contained the metal plates.

They rose and faced him as he stepped into the room. The act of robbery which he found them coolly perpetrating in broad daylight, instantly set his irritable temper in a flame. He rushed at the younger of the two men--being the one nearest to him. The ruffian sprang aside out of his reach; snatched up from the table on which it was lying ready, a short loaded staff of leather called "a life-preserver;" and struck him with it on the head, before he had recovered himself, and could face his man once more.

From that moment, he remembered nothing, until he had regained his consciousness after the first shock of the blow.

He found himself lying, giddy and bleeding, on the floor; and he saw the child (who must have strayed into the room while he was senseless) standing petrified with fear, looking at him. The idea of making use of her--as the only living being near--to give the alarm, came to him instinctively the moment he recognized her. He coaxed the little creature to venture within reach of his hand; and, dipping his finger in the blood that was flowing from him, sent us the terrible message which I had spelt out on the back of her frock. That done, he exerted his last remains of strength to push her gently towards the open window, and direct her to go home. He fainted from loss of blood, while he was still repeating the words, "Go home! go home!"--and still seeing, or fancying that he saw, the child stopping obstinately in the room, stupefied with terror. Of the time at which she found the courage and the sense to run home, and of all that had happened after that, he was necessarily ignorant. His next conscious impression was the impression, already recorded, of seeing Lucilla sitting by his bedside.

The account of the matter thus given by Oscar, was followed by a supplementary statement provided by the police.

The machinery of the law was put in action; and the village was kept in a fever of excitement for days together. Never was there a more complete

investigation--and never was a poorer result achieved. Substantially, nothing was discovered beyond what I had already found out for myself. The robbery was declared to have been (as I had supposed) a planned thing. Though we had none of us noticed them at the rectory, it was ascertained that the thieves had been at Dimchurch on the day when the unlucky plates were first delivered at Browndown. Having taken their time to examine the house, and to make themselves acquainted with the domestic habits of the persons in it, the rogues had paid their second visit to the village--no doubt to commit the robbery--on the occasion when we had discovered them. Foiled by the unexpected return of the gold and silver to London, they had waited again, had followed the plates back to Browndown, and had effected their object--thanks to the lonely situation of the house, and to the murderous blow which had stretched Oscar insensible on the floor.

More than one witness had met them on the road back to Brighton, with the packing-case in the chaise. But when they returned to the livery-stables from which they had hired the vehicle, the case was not to be seen. Accomplices in Brighton had, in all probability, assisted them in getting rid of it, and in shifting the plates into ordinary articles of luggage, which would attract no special attention at the railway station. This was the explanation given by the police. Right or wrong, the one fact remains that the villains were not caught, and that the assault and robbery at Oscar's house may be added to the long list of crimes cleverly enough committed to defy the vengeance of the law.

For ourselves, we all agreed--led by Lucilla--to indulge in no useless lamentations, and to be grateful that Oscar had escaped without serious injury. The mischief was done; and there was an end of it.

In this philosophical spirit, we looked at the affair while our invalid was recovering. We all plumed ourselves on our excellent good sense--and (ah, poor stupid human wretches!) we were all fatally wrong. So far from the mischief being at an end, the mischief had only begun. The true results of the robbery at Browndown were yet to show themselves, and were yet to be felt in the strangest and the saddest way by every member of the little circle assembled at Dimchurch.