

## **CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH**

### First Result of the Robbery

BETWEEN five and six weeks passed. Oscar was out of his bed-room, and was well of his wound.

During this lapse of time, Lucilla steadily pursued that process of her own of curing him, which was to end in marrying him. Never had I seen such nursing before--never do I expect to see such nursing again. From morning to night, she interested him, and kept him in good spirits. The charming creature actually made her blindness a means of lightening the weary hours of the man she loved.

Sometimes, she would sit before Oscar's looking-glass, and imitate all the innumerable tricks, artifices, and vanities of a coquette arraying herself for conquest--with such wonderful truth and humour of mimicry, that you would have sworn she possessed the use of her eyes. Sometimes, she would show him her extraordinary power of calculating by the sound of a person's voice, the exact position which that person occupied towards her in a room. Selecting me as the victim, she would first provide herself with one of the nosegays always placed by her own hands at Oscar's bedside; and would then tell me to take up my position noiselessly in any part of the room that I pleased, and to say "Lucilla." The instant the words were out of my mouth, the nosegay flew from her hand, and hit me on the face. She never once missed her aim, on any one of the occasions when this experiment was tried--and she never once flagged in her childish enjoyment of the exhibition of her own skill.

Nobody was allowed to pour out Oscar's medicine but herself. She knew when the spoon into which it was to be measured was full, by the sound which the liquid made in falling into it. When he was able to sit up in his bed, and when she was standing at the pillow-side, she could tell him how near his head was to hers, by the change which he produced, when he bent forward or when he drew back, in the action of the air on her face. In the same way, she knew as well as he knew, when the sun was out and when it was behind a cloud--judging by the differing effect of the air, at such times, on her forehead and on her cheeks.

All the litter of little objects accumulating in a sick-room, she kept in perfect order on a system of her own. She delighted in putting the room tidy late in

the evening, when we helpless people who could see were beginning to think of lighting the candles. The time when we could just discern her, flitting to and fro in the dusk, in her bright summer dress--now visible as she passed the window, now lost in the shadows at the end of the room--was the time when she began to clear the tables of the things that had been wanted in the day, and to replace them by the things which would be wanted at night. We were only allowed to light the candles when they showed us the room magically put in order during the darkness as if the fairies had done it. She laughed scornfully at our surprise, and said she sincerely pitied the poor useless people who could only see!

The same pleasure which she had in arranging the room in the dark she also felt in wandering all over the house in the dark, and in making herself thoroughly acquainted with every inch of it from top to bottom. As soon as Oscar was well enough to go down-stairs, she insisted on leading him.

"You have been so long up in your bedroom," she said, "that you must have forgotten the rest of the house. Take my arm--and come along. Now we are out in the passage. Mind! there is a step down, just at this place. And now a step up again. Here is a sharp corner to turn at the top of the staircase. And there is a rod out of the stair-carpet, and an awkward fold in it that might throw you down." So she took him into his own drawing-room, as if it was he that was blind, and she who had the use of her eyes. Who could resist such a nurse as this? Is it wonderful that I heard a sound suspiciously like the sound of a kiss, on that first day of convalescence, when I happened for a moment to be out of the room? I strongly suspected her of leading the way in that also. She was so wonderfully composed when I came back--and he was so wonderfully flurried.

In a week from his convalescence, Lucilla completed the cure of the patient. In other words, she received from Oscar an offer of marriage. I have not the slightest doubt, in my own mind, that he required assistance in bringing this delicate matter to a climax--and that Lucilla helped him.

I may be right or I may be wrong about this. But I can at least certify that Lucilla was in such mad high spirits when she told me the news out in the garden, on a lovely autumn morning, that she actually danced for joy--and, more improper still, she made me, at my discreet time of life, dance too. She took me round the waist, and we waltzed on the grass--Mrs. Finch standing by in the condemned blue merino jacket (with the baby in one hand and the novel in the other), and warning us both that if we lost half an hour out of our day, in whirling each other round the lawn, we should never succeed in picking it up again in that house. We went on whirling, for all that, until we

were both out of breath. Nothing short of downright exhaustion could tame Lucilla. As for me, I am, I sincerely believe, the rashest person of my age now in existence. (What is my age? Ah, I am always discreet about that; it is the one exception.) Set down my rashness to my French nationality, my easy conscience, and my excellent stomach--and let us go on with our story.

There was a private interview at Browndown, later on that day, between Oscar and Reverend Finch.

Of what passed on that occasion, I was not informed. The rector came back among us with his head high in the air, strutting magnificently on his wizen little legs. He embraced his daughter in pathetic silence, and gave me his hand with a serene smile of condescension worthy of the greatest humbug (say Louis the Fourteenth) that ever sat on a throne. When he got the better of his paternal emotion, and began to speak, his voice was so big that I really thought it must have burst him. The vapor of words in which he enveloped himself (condensed on paper) amounted to these two statements. First, that he hailed in Oscar (not having, I suppose, children enough already of his own) the advent of another son. Secondly, that he saw the finger of Providence in everything that had happened. Alas, for me! My irreverent French nature saw nothing but the finger of Finch--in Oscar's pocket.

The wedding-day was not then actually fixed. It was only generally arranged that the marriage should take place in about six weeks.

This interval was intended to serve a double purpose. It was to give the lawyers time to prepare the marriage settlements, and to give Oscar time to completely recover his health. Some anxiety was felt by all of us on this latter subject. His wound was well, and his mind was itself again. But still there was something wrong with him, for all that.

Those curious contradictions in his character which I have already mentioned, showed themselves more strangely than ever. The man who had found the courage (when his blood was up) to measure himself alone and unarmed against two robbers, was now unable to enter the room in which the struggle had taken place, without trembling from head to foot. He, who had laughed at me when I begged him not to sleep in the house by himself, now had two men (a gardener and an indoor servant) domiciled at Browndown to protect him--and felt no sense of security even in that. He was constantly dreaming that the ruffian with the "life-preserver" was attacking him again, or that he was lying bleeding on the floor and coaxing Jicks to venture within reach of his hand. If any of us hinted at his

occupying himself once more with his favorite art, he stopped his ears, and entreated us not to renew his horrible associations with the past. He would not even look at his box of chasing tools. The doctor--summoned to say what was the matter with him--told us that his nervous system had been shaken, and frankly acknowledged that there was nothing to be done but to wait until time set it right again.

I am afraid I must confess that I myself took no very indulgent view of the patient's case.

It was his duty to exert himself--as I thought. He appeared to me to be too indolent to make a proper effort to better his own condition. Lucilla and I had more than one animated discussion about him. On a certain evening when we were at the piano gossiping, and playing in the intervals, she was downright angry with me for not sympathizing with her darling as unreservedly as she did. "I have noticed one thing, Madame Pratolungo," she said to me, with a flushed face and a heightened tone. "You have never done Oscar justice from the first."

(Mark those trifling words. The time is coming when you will hear of them again.)

The preparations for the contemplated marriage went on. The lawyers produced their sketch of the settlement; and Oscar wrote (to an address in New York, given to him by Nugent) to tell his brother of the approaching change in his life, and of the circumstances which had brought it about.

The marriage settlement was not shown to me; but, from certain signs and tokens, I guessed that Oscar's perfect disinterestedness on the question of money had been turned to profitable account by Oscar's future father-in-law. Reverend Finch was reported to have shed tears when he first read the document. And Lucilla came out of the study, after an interview with her father, more thoroughly and vehemently indignant than I had ever seen her yet. "Don't ask what is the matter!" she said to me between her teeth. "I am ashamed to tell you." When Oscar came in, a little later, she fell on her knees--literally on her knees--before him. Some overmastering agitation was in possession of her whole being, which made her, for the moment, reckless of what she said or did. "I worship you!" she burst out hysterically, kissing his hand. "You are the noblest of living men. I can never, never be worthy of you!" The interpretation of these high-flown sayings and doings was, to my mind, briefly this: Oscar's money in the rector's pocket, and the rector's daughter used as the means.

The interval expired; the weeks succeeded each other. All had been long since ready for the marriage--and still the marriage did not take place.

Far from becoming himself again, with time to help him--as the doctor had foretold--Oscar steadily grew worse. All the nervous symptoms (to use the medical phrase) which I have already described, strengthened instead of loosening their hold on him. He grew thinner and thinner, and paler and paler. Early in the month of November, we sent for the doctor again. The question to be put to him this time, was the question (suggested by Lucilla) of trying as a last remedy change of air.

Something--I forget what--delayed the arrival of our medical man. Oscar had given up all idea of seeing him that day, and had come to us at the rectory--when the doctor drove into Dimchurch. He was stopped before he went on to Browndown; and he and his patient saw each other alone in Lucilla's sitting-room.

They were a long time together. Lucilla, waiting with me in my bed-chamber, grew impatient. She begged me to knock at the sitting-room door, and inquire when she might be permitted to assist at the consultation.

I found doctor and patient standing together at the window, talking quietly. Evidently, nothing had passed to excite either of them in the smallest degree. Oscar looked a little pale and weary--but he, like his medical adviser, was perfectly composed.

"There is a young lady in the next room," I said, "who is getting anxious to hear what your consultation has ended in."

The doctor looked at Oscar, and smiled.

"There is really nothing to tell Miss Finch," he said. "Mr. Dubourg and I have gone all over the case again--and nothing new has come of it. His nervous system has not recovered its balance so soon as I expected. I am sorry--but I am not in the least alarmed. At his age, things are sure to come right in the end. He must be patient, and the young lady must be patient. I can say no more."

"Do you see any objection to his trying change of air?" I inquired.

"None, whatever! Let him go where he likes, and amuse himself as he likes. You are all of you a little disposed to take Mr. Dubourg's case too seriously. Except the nervous derangement (unpleasant enough in itself, I grant), there

is really nothing the matter with him. He has not a trace of organic disease anywhere. The pulse," continued the doctor, laying his fingers lightly on Oscar's wrist, "is perfectly satisfactory. I never felt a quieter pulse in my life."

As the words passed his lips, a frightful contortion fastened itself on Oscar's face.

His eyes turned up hideously.

From head to foot his whole body was wrenched round, as if giant hands had twisted it, towards the right.

Before I could speak, he was in convulsions on the floor at his doctor's feet.

"Good God, what is this!" I cried out.

The doctor loosened his cravat, and moved away the furniture that was near him. That done, he waited--looking at the writhing figure on the floor.

"Can you do nothing more?" I asked.

He shook his head gravely. "Nothing more."

"What is it?"

"An epileptic fit."