

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH

Family Troubles

IN four or five days more, Lucilla's melancholy doubts about Oscar were confirmed. He was attacked by a second fit.

The promised consultation with the physician from Brighton took place. Our new doctor did not encourage us to hope. The second fit following so close on the first was, in his opinion, a bad sign. He gave general directions for the treatment of Oscar; and left him to decide for himself whether he would or would not try change of scene. No change, the physician appeared to think, would exert any immediate influence on the recurrence of the epileptic attacks. The patient's general health might be benefited, and that was all. As for the question of the marriage, he declared without hesitation that we must for the present dismiss all consideration of it from our minds.

Lucilla received the account of what passed at the visit of the doctors with a stubborn resignation which it distressed me to see. "Remember what I told you when the first attack seized him," she said. "Our summer-time is ended; our winter is come."

Her manner, while she spoke, was the manner of a person who is waiting without hope--who feels deliberately that calamity is near. She only roused herself when Oscar came in. He was, naturally enough, in miserable spirits, under the sudden alteration in all his prospects. Lucilla did her best to cheer him, and succeeded. On my side, I tried vainly to persuade him to leave Browndown and amuse himself in some gayer place. He shrank from new faces and new scenes. Between these two unelastic young people, I felt even my native good spirits beginning to sink. If we had been all three down in the bottom of a dry well in a wilderness, we could hardly have surveyed a more dismal prospect than the prospect we were contemplating now. By good luck, Oscar, like Lucilla, was passionately fond of music. We turned to the piano as our best resource in those days of our adversity. Lucilla and I took it in turns to play, and Oscar listened. I have to report that we got through a great deal of music. I have also to acknowledge that we were very dull.

As for Reverend Finch, he talked his way through his share of the troubles

that were trying us now, at the full compass of his voice.

If you had heard the little priest in those days, you would have supposed that nobody could feel our domestic misfortunes as he felt them, and grieve over them as he grieved. He was a sight to see, on the day of the medical consultation; strutting up and down his wife's sitting-room, and haranguing his audience--composed of his wife and myself. Mrs. Finch sat in one corner, with the baby and the novel, and the petticoat and the shawl. I occupied the other corner; summoned to "consult with the rector." In plain words, summoned to hear Mr. Finch declare that he was the person principally overshadowed by the cloud which hung on the household.

"I despair, Madame Pratolungo--I assure you, I despair--of conveying any idea of how I feel under this most melancholy state of things. You have been very good; you have shown the sympathy of a true friend. But you cannot possibly understand how this blow has fallen on Me. I am crushed. Madame Pratolungo!" (he appealed to me, in my corner); "Mrs. Finch!" (he appealed to his wife, in her corner)--"I am crushed. There is no other word to express it but the word I have used. Crushed." He stopped in the middle of the room. He looked expectantly at me--he looked expectantly at his wife. His face and manner said plainly, "If both these women faint, I shall consider it a natural and becoming proceeding on their parts, after what I have just told them." I waited for the lead of the lady of the house. Mrs. Finch did not roll prostrate, with the baby and the novel, on the floor. Thus encouraged, I presumed to keep my seat. The rector still waited for us. I looked as miserable as I could. Mrs. Finch cast her eyes up reverentially at her husband, as if she thought him the noblest of created beings, and silently put her handkerchief to her eyes. Mr. Finch was satisfied; Mr. Finch went on. "My health has suffered--I assure you, Madame Pratolungo, MY health has suffered. Since this sad occurrence, my stomach has given way. My balance is lost--my usual regularity is gone. I am subject--entirely through this miserable business--to fits of morbid appetite. I want things at wrong times--breakfast in the middle of the night; dinner at four in the morning. I want something now!" Mr. Finch stopped, horror-struck at his condition; pondering with his eyebrows fiercely knit, and his hand pressed convulsively on the lower buttons of his rusty black waistcoat. Mrs. Finch's watery blue eyes looked across the room at me, in a moist melancholy of conjugal distress. The rector, suddenly enlightened after his consultation with his stomach, strutted to the door, flung it wide open, and called down the kitchen stairs with a voice of thunder, "Poach me an egg!" He came back into the room--held another consultation, keeping his eyes severely fixed on me--strutted back in a furious hurry to the door--and bellowed a counter-order down the kitchen-stairs, "No egg! Do me a red herring!" He came back for the second time,

with his eyes closed and his hand laid distractedly on his head. He appealed alternately to Mrs. Finch and to me. "See for yourselves--Mrs. Finch! Madame Pratolungo!--see for yourselves what a state I am in. It's simply pitiable. I hesitate about the most trifling things. First, I think I want a poached egg--then, I think I want a red herring--now I don't know what I want. Upon my word of honor as a clergyman and a gentleman, I don't know what I want! Morbid appetite all day; morbid wakefulness all night--what a condition! I can't rest. I disturb my wife at night. Mrs. Finch! I disturb you at night. How many times--since this misfortune fell upon us--do I turn in bed before I fall off to sleep? Eight times? Are you certain of it? Don't exaggerate! Are you certain you counted! Very well: good creature! I never remember--I assure you, Madame Pratolungo, I never remember--such a complete upset as this before. The nearest approach to it was some years since, at my wife's last confinement but four. Mrs. Finch! was it at your last confinement but four? or your last but five? Your last but four? Are you sure. Are you certain you are not misleading our friend here? Very well: good creature! Pecuniary difficulties, Madame Pratolungo, were at the bottom of it on that last occasion. I got over the pecuniary difficulties. How am I to get over this? My plans for Oscar and Lucilla were completely arranged. My relations with my wedded children were pleasantly laid out. I saw my own future; I saw the future of my family. What do I see now? All, so to speak, annihilated at a blow. Inscrutable Providence!" He paused, and lifted his eyes and hands devotionally to the ceiling. The cook appeared with the red herring. "Inscrutable Providence"--proceeded Mr. Finch, a tone lower. "Eat it, dear," said Mrs. Finch, "while it's hot." The rector paused again. His unresting tongue urged him to proceed; his undisciplined stomach clamored for the herring. The cook uncovered the dish. Mr. Finch's nose instantly sided with Mr. Finch's stomach. He stopped at "Inscrutable Providence"--and peppered his herring.

Having reported how the rector spoke, in the presence of the disaster which had fallen on the family, I have only to complete the picture by stating next what he did. He borrowed two hundred pounds of Oscar; and left off commanding red herrings in the day and disturbing Mrs. Finch at night, immediately afterwards.

The dull autumn days ended, and the long nights of winter began.

No change for the better appeared in our prospects. The doctors did their best for Oscar--without avail. The horrible fits came back, again and again. Day after day, our dull lives went monotonously on. I almost began now to

believe, with Lucilla, that a crisis of some sort must be at hand. "This cannot last," I used to say to myself--generally when I was very hungry. "Something will happen before the year comes to an end."

The month of December began; and something happened at last. The family troubles at the rectory were matched by family troubles of my own. A letter arrived for me from one of my younger sisters at Paris. It contained alarming news of a person very dear to me--already mentioned in the first of these pages as my good Papa.

Was the venerable author of my being dangerously ill of a mortal disease? Alas! he was not exactly that--but the next worst thing to it. He was dangerously in love with a disreputable young woman. At what age? At the age of seventy-five! What can we say of my surviving parent? We can only say, This is a vigorous nature; Papa has an evergreen heart.

I am grieved to trouble you with my family concerns. But they mix themselves up intimately, as you will see in due time, with the concerns of Oscar and Lucilla. It is my unhappy destiny that I cannot possibly take you through the present narrative, without sooner or later disclosing the one weakness (amiable weakness) of the gayest and brightest and best-preserved man of his time.

Ah, I am now treading on egg-shells, I know! The English specter called Propriety springs up rampant on my writing-table, and whispers furiously in my ear, "Madame Pratolungo, raise a blush on the cheek of Innocence, and it is all over from that moment with you and your story." Oh, inflammable Cheek of Innocence, be good-natured for once, and I will rack my brains to try if I can put it to you without offense! May I picture good Papa as an elder in the Temple of Venus, burning incense inexhaustibly on the altar of love? No: Temple of Venus is Pagan; altar of love is not proper--take them out. Let me only say of my evergreen parent that his life from youth to age had been one unintermitting recognition of the charms of the sex, and that my sisters and I (being of the sex) could not find it in our hearts to abandon him on that account. So handsome, so affectionate, so sweet-tempered; with only one fault--and that a compliment to the women, who naturally adored him in return! We accepted our destiny. For years past (since the death of Mamma), we accustomed ourselves to live in perpetual dread of his marrying some one of the hundreds of unscrupulous hussies who took possession of him: and, worse if possible than that, of his fighting duels about them with men young enough to be his grandsons. Papa was so susceptible! Papa was so brave! Over and over again, I had been summoned to interfere, as the daughter who had the strongest influence over him. I had succeeded in

effecting his rescue, now by one means, and now by another; ending always, however, in the same sad way, by the sacrifice of money for damages--on which damages, when the woman is shameless enough to claim them, my verdict is, "Serve her right!"

On the present occasion, it was the old story over again. My sisters had done their best to stop it, and had failed. I had no choice but to appear on the scene--to begin, perhaps, by boxing her ears: to end, certainly, by filling her pockets.

My absence at this time was something more than an annoyance--it was a downright grief to my blind Lucilla. On the morning of my departure, she clung to me as if she was determined not to let me go.

"What shall I do without you?" she said. "It is hard, in these dreary days, to lose the comfort of hearing your voice. I shall feel all my security gone, when I feel you no longer near me. How many days shall you be away?"

"A day to get to Paris," I answered; "and a day to get back--two. Five days (if I can do it in the time) to thunder-strike the hussy, and to rescue Papa--seven. Let us say, if possible, a week."

"You must be back, no matter what happen, before the new year."

"Why?"

"I have my yearly visit to pay to my aunt. It has been twice put off. I must absolutely go to London on the last day of the old year, and stay there my allotted three months in Miss Batchford's house. I had hoped to be Oscar's wife before the time came round again----" she waited a moment to steady her voice. "That is all over now. We must be parted. If I can't leave you here to console him and to take care of him, come what may of it--I shall stay at Dimchurch."

Her staying at Dimchurch, while she was still unmarried, meant (under the terms of her uncle's will) sacrificing her fortune. If Reverend Finch had heard her, he would not even have been able to say "Inscrutable Providence"--he would have lost his senses on the spot.

"Don't be afraid," I said; "I shall be back, Lucilla, before you go. Besides, Oscar may get better. He may be able to follow you to London, and visit you at your aunt's."

She shook her head, with such a sad, sad doubt of it, that the tears came into my eyes. I gave her a last kiss--and hurried away.

My route was to Newhaven, and then across the Channel to Dieppe. I don't think I really knew how fond I had grown of Lucilla, until I lost sight of the rectory at the turn in the road to Brighton. My natural firmness deserted me; I felt torturing presentiments that some great misfortune would happen in my absence; I astonished myself--I, the widow of the Spartan Pratolungo!--by having a good cry, like any other woman.

Sooner or later, we susceptible people pay with the heartache for the privilege of loving. No matter: heartache or not, one must have something to love in this world as long as one lives in it. I have lived in it--never mind how many years--and I have got Lucilla. Before Lucilla I had the Doctor. Before the Doctor--ah, my friends, we won't look back beyond the Doctor!