

## **CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH**

### Second Result of the Robbery

THE history of my proceedings in Paris can be dismissed in a very few words. It is only necessary to dwell in detail on one among the many particulars which connect themselves in my memory with the rescue of good Papa.

The affair, this time, assumed the gravest possible aspect. The venerable victim had gone the length of renewing his youth, in respect of his teeth, his hair, his complexion, and his figure (this last involving the purchase of a pair of stays). I declare I hardly knew him again, he was so outrageously and unnaturally young. The utmost stretch of my influence was exerted over him in vain. He embraced me with the most touching fervour; he expressed the noblest sentiments--but in the matter of his contemplated marriage, he was immovable. Life was only tolerable to him on one condition. The beloved object, or death--such was the programme of this volcanic old man.

To make the prospect more hopeless still, the beloved object proved, on this occasion, to be a bold enough woman to play her trump card at starting.

I give the jade her due. She assumed a perfectly unassailable attitude: we had her full permission to break off the match--if we could. "I refer you to your father. Pray understand that I don't wish to marry him, if his daughters object to it. He has only to say, 'Release me.' From that moment he is free." There was no contending against such a system of defence as this. We knew as well as she did that our fascinated parent would not say the word. Our one chance was to spend money in investigating the antecedent indiscretions of the lady's life, and to produce against her proof so indisputable that not even an old man's infatuation could say, This is a lie.

We disbursed; we investigated; we secured our proof. It took a fortnight. At the end of that time, we had the necessary materials in hand for opening the eyes of good Papa.

In the course of the inquiry I was brought into contact with many strange people--among others, with a man who startled me, at our first interview, by presenting a personal deformity, which, with all my experience of the world, I now saw oddly enough for the first time.

The man's face, instead of exhibiting any of the usual shades of complexion, was hideously distinguished by a superhuman--I had almost said a devilish--colouring of livid blackish blue! He proved to be a most kind, intelligent, and serviceable person. But when we first confronted each other, his horrible color so startled me, that I could not repress a cry of alarm. He not only passed over my involuntary act of rudeness in the most indulgent manner--he explained to me the cause which had produced his peculiarity of complexion; so as to put me at my ease before we entered on the delicate private inquiry which had brought us together.

"I beg your pardon," said this unfortunate man, "for not having warned you of my disfigurement, before I entered the room. There are hundreds of people discolored as I am, in the various parts of the civilized world; and I supposed that you had met, in the course of your experience, with other examples of my case. The blue tinge in my complexion is produced by the effect on the blood of Nitrate of Silver--taken internally. It is the only medicine which relieves sufferers like me from an otherwise incurable malady. We have no alternative but to accept the consequences for the sake of the cure."

He did not mention what his malady had been; and I abstained, it is needless to say, from questioning him further. I got used to his disfigurement in the course of my relations with him; and I should no doubt have forgotten my blue man in attending to more absorbing matters of interest, if the effects of Nitrate of Silver as a medicine had not been once more unexpectedly forced on my attention, in another quarter, and under circumstances which surprised me in no ordinary degree.

Having saved Papa on the brink of--let us say, his twentieth precipice, it was next necessary to stay a few days longer and reconcile him to the hardship of being rescued in spite of himself. You would have been greatly shocked, if you had seen how he suffered. He gnashed his expensive teeth; he tore his beautifully manufactured hair. In the fervour of his emotions, I have no doubt he would have burst his new stays--if I had not taken them away, and sold them half-price, and made (to that small extent) a profit out of our calamity to set against the loss. Do what one may in the detestable system of modern society, the pivot on which it all turns is Money. Money, when you are saving Freedom! Money, when you are saving Papa! Is there no remedy for this? A word in your ear. Wait till the next revolution!

During the time of my absence, I had of course corresponded with Lucilla.

Her letters to me--very sad and very short--reported a melancholy state of things at Dimchurch. While I had been away, the dreadful epileptic seizures had attacked Oscar with increasing frequency and increasing severity. The moment I could see my way to getting back to England, I wrote to Lucilla to cheer her with the intimation of my return. Two days only before my departure from Paris, I received another letter from her. I was weak enough to be almost afraid to open it. Her writing to me again, when she knew that we should be re-united at such an early date, suggested that she must have some very startling news to communicate. My mind misgave me that it would prove to be news of the worst sort.

I summoned courage to open the envelope. Ah, what fools we are! For once that our presentments come right, they prove a hundred times to be wrong. Instead of distressing me, the letter delighted me. Our gloomy prospect was brightening at last.

Thus--feeling her way over the paper, in her large childish characters--Lucilla wrote:

"DEAREST FRIEND AND SISTER,--I cannot wait until we meet, to tell you my good news. The Brighton doctor has been dismissed; and a doctor from London has been tried instead. My dear! for intellect there is nothing like London. The new man sees, thinks, and makes up his mind on the spot. He has a way of his own of treating Oscar's case; and he answers for curing him of the horrible fits. There is news for you! Come back, and let us jump for joy together. How wrong I was to doubt the future! Never, never, never will I doubt it again. This is the longest letter I have ever written.

"Your affectionate,

"LUCILLA."

To this, a postscript was added, in Oscar's handwriting, as follows:--

"Lucilla has told you that there is some hope for me at last. What I write in this place is written without her knowledge--for your private ear only. Take the first opportunity you can find of coming to see me at Browndown, without allowing Lucilla to hear of it. I have a great favor to ask of you. My happiness depends on your granting it. You shall know what it is, when we meet.

"OSCAR."

This postscript puzzled me.

It was not in harmony with the implicit confidence which I had observed Oscar to place habitually in Lucilla. It jarred on my experience of his character, which presented him to me as the reverse of a reserved secretive man. His concealment of his identity, when he first came among us, had been a forced concealment--due entirely to his horror of being identified with the hero of the trial. In all the ordinary relations of life, he was open and unreserved to a fault. That he could have a secret to keep from Lucilla, and to confide to me, was something perfectly unintelligible to my mind. It highly excited my curiosity; it gave me a new reason for longing to get back.

I was able to make all my arrangements, and to bid adieu to my father and my sisters on the evening of the twenty-third. Early on the morning of the twenty-fourth, I left Paris, and reached Dimchurch in time for the final festivities in celebration of Christmas Eve.

The first hour of Christmas Day had struck on the clock in our own pretty sitting-room, before I could prevail upon Lucilla to let me rest, after my journey, in bed. She was now once more the joyous light-hearted creature of our happier time; and she had so much to say to me, that not even her father himself (on this occasion) could have talked her down. The next morning she paid the penalty of exciting herself over-night. When I went into her room, she was suffering from a nervous head-ache, and was not able to rise at her usual hour. She proposed of her own accord that I should go alone to Browndown to see Oscar on my return. It is only doing common justice to myself to say that this was a relief to me. If she had had the use of her eyes, my conscience would have been easy enough--but I shrank from deceiving my dear blind girl, even in the slightest things.

So, with Lucilla's knowledge and approval, I went to Oscar alone.

I found him fretful and anxious--ready to flame out into one of his sudden passions, on the smallest provocation. Not the slightest reflection of Lucilla's recovered cheerfulness appeared in Lucilla's lover.

"Has she said anything to you about the new doctor?" were the first words he addressed to me.

"She has told me that she feels the greatest faith in him," I answered. "She firmly believes that he speaks the truth in saying he can cure you."

"Did she show any curiosity to know how he is curing me?"

"Not the slightest curiosity that I could see. It is enough for her that you are to be cured. The rest she leaves to the doctor."

My last answer appeared to relieve him. He sighed, and leaned back in his chair. "That's right!" he said to himself. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Is the doctor's treatment of you a secret?" I asked.

"It must be a secret from Lucilla," he said, speaking very earnestly. "If she attempts to find it out, she must be kept--for the present, at least--from all knowledge of it. Nobody has any influence over her but you. I look to you to help me."

"Is this the favor you had to ask me?"

"Yes."

"Am I to know the secret of the medical treatment?"

"Certainly! How can I expect you to help me unless you know what a serious reason there is for keeping Lucilla in the dark."

He laid a strong emphasis on the two words "serious reason. I began to feel a little uneasy. I had never yet taken the slightest advantage of my poor Lucilla's blindness. And here was her promised husband--of all the people in the world--proposing to me to keep her in the dark.

"Is the new doctor's treatment dangerous?" I inquired.

"Not in the least."

"Is it not so certain as he has led Lucilla to believe?"

"It is quite certain.

"Did the other doctors know of it?"

"Yes."

"Why did they not try it?"

"They were afraid."

"Afraid? What is the treatment?"

"Medicine."

"Many medicines? or one?"

"Only one."

"What is the name of it?"

"Nitrate of Silver."

I started to my feet, looked at him, and dropped back into my chair.

My mind reverted, the instant I recovered myself, to the effect produced on me when the blue man in Paris first entered my presence. In informing me of the effect of the medicine, he had (you will remember) concealed from me the malady for which he had taken it. It had been left to Oscar, of all the people in the world, to enlighten me--and that by a reference to his own case! I was so shocked that I sat speechless.

With his quick sensibilities, there was no need for me to express myself in words. My face revealed to him what was passing in my mind.

"You have seen a person who has taken Nitrate of Silver!" he exclaimed.

"Have you?" I asked.

"I know the price I pay for being cured," he answered quietly.

His composure staggered me. "How long have you been taking this horrible drug?" I inquired.

"A little more than a week."

"I see no change in you yet."

"The doctor tells me there will be no visible change for weeks and weeks to come."

Those words roused a momentary hope in me. "There is time to alter your mind," I said. "For heaven's sake reconsider your resolution before it is too

late!"

He smiled bitterly. "Weak as I am," he answered, "for once, my mind is made up."

I suppose I took a woman's view of the matter. I lost my temper when I looked at his beautiful complexion and thought of the future.

"Are you in your right senses?" I burst out. "Do you mean to tell me that you are deliberately bent on making yourself an object of horror to everybody who sees you?"

"The one person whose opinion I care for," he replied, "will never see me."

I understood him at last. That was the consideration which had reconciled him to it!

Lucilla's horror of dark people and dark shades of color, of all kinds, was, it is needless to say, recalled to my memory by the turn the conversation was taking now. Had she confessed it to him, as she had confessed it to me? No! I remembered that she had expressly warned me not to admit him into our confidence in this matter. At an early period of their acquaintance, she had asked him which of his parents he resembled. This led him into telling her that his father had been a dark man. Lucilla's delicacy had at once taken the alarm. "He speaks very tenderly of his dead father," she said to me. "It may hurt him if he finds out the antipathy I have to dark people. Let us keep it to ourselves." As things now were, it was on the tip of my tongue to remind him, that Lucilla would hear of his disfigurement from other people; and then to warn him of the unpleasant result that might follow. On reflection, however, I thought it wiser to wait a little and sound his motives first.

"Before you tell me how I can help you," I said, "I want to know one thing more. Have you decided in this serious matter entirely by yourself? Have you taken no advice?"

"I don't want advice," he answered sharply. "My case admits of no choice. Even such a nervous undecided creature as I am, can judge for himself where there is no alternative."

"Did the doctors tell you there was no alternative?" I asked.

"The doctors were afraid to tell me. I had to force it out of them. I said, 'I

appeal to your honor to answer a plain question plainly. Is there any certain prospect of my getting the better of the fits?' They only said, 'At your time of life, we may reasonably hope so.' I pressed them closer:--'Can you fix a date to which I may look forward as the date of my deliverance?' They could neither of them do it. All they could say was, 'Our experience justifies us in believing that you will grow out of it; but it does not justify us in saying when.' 'Then, I may be years growing out of it?' They were obliged to own that it might be so. 'Or I may never grow out of it, at all?' They tried to turn the conversation. I wouldn't have it. I said, 'Tell me honestly, is that one of the possibilities, in my case?' The Dimchurch doctor looked at the London doctor. The London man said, 'If you will have it, it is one of the possibilities.' Just consider the prospect which his answer placed before me! Day after day, week after week, month after month, always in danger, go where I may, of falling down in a fit--is that a miserable position? or is it not?"

How could I answer him? What could I say?

He went on:--

"Add to that wretched state of things that I am engaged to be married. The hardest disappointment which can fall on a man, falls on me. The happiness of my life is within my reach--and I am forbidden to enjoy it. It is not only my health that is broken up, my prospects in life are ruined as well. The woman I love is a woman forbidden to me while I suffer as I suffer now. Realize that--and then fancy you see a man sitting at this table here, with pen, ink, and paper before him, who has only to scribble a line or two, and to begin the cure of you from that moment. Deliverance in a few months from the horror of the fits; marriage in a few months to the woman you love. That heavenly prospect in exchange for the hellish existence that you are enduring now. And the one price to pay for it, a discolored face for the rest of your life--which the one person who is dearest to you will never see? Would you have hesitated? When the doctor took up the pen to write the prescription--tell me, if you had been in my place, would you have said, No?"

I still sat silent. My obstinacy--women are such mules!--declined to give way, even when my conscience told me that he was right.

He sprang to his feet, in the same fever of excitement which I remembered so well, when I had irritated him at Browndown into telling me who he really was.

"Would you have said, No?" he reiterated, stooping over me, flushed and



heated, as he had stooped on that first occasion, when he had whispered his name in my ear. "Would you?" he repeated, louder and louder--"would you?"

At the third reiteration of the words, the frightful contortion that I knew so well, seized on his face. The wrench to the right twisted his body. He dropped at my feet. Good God! who could have declared that he was wrong, with such an argument in his favor as I saw at that moment? Who would not have said that any disfigurement would be welcome as a refuge from this?

The servant ran in, and helped me to move the furniture to a safe distance from him, "There won't be much more of it, ma'am," said the man, noticing my agitation, and trying to compose me. "In a month or two, the doctor says the medicine will get hold of him." I could say nothing on my side--I could only reproach myself bitterly for disputing with him and exciting him, and leading perhaps to the hideous seizure which had attacked him in my presence for the second time.

The fit on this occasion was a short one. Perhaps the drug was already beginning to have some influence over him? In twenty minutes, he was able to resume his chair, and to go on talking to me.

"You think I shall horrify you when my face has turned blue," he said with a faint smile. "Don't I horrify you now when you see me in convulsions on the floor?"

I entreated him to dwell on it no more.

"God knows," I said, "you have convinced me--obstinate as I am. Let us try to think of nothing now but of the prospect of your being cured. What do you wish me to do?"

"You have great influence over Lucilla," he said. "If she expresses any curiosity, in future conversations with you, about the effect of the medicine, check her at once. Keep her as ignorant of it as she is now!"

"Why?"

"Why! If she knows what you know, how will she feel? Shocked and horrified, as you felt. What will she do? She will come straight here, and try, as you have tried, to persuade me to give it up. Is that true or not?"

(Impossible to deny that it was true.)

"I am so fond of her," he went on, "that I can refuse her nothing. She would end in making me give it up. The instant her back was turned, I should repent my own weakness, and return to the medicine. Here is a perpetual struggle in prospect, for a man who is already worn out. Is it desirable, after what you have just seen, to expose me to that?"

It would have been useless cruelty to expose him to it. How could I do otherwise than consent to make his sacrifice of himself--his necessary sacrifice--as easy as I could? At the same time, I implored him to remember one thing.

"Mind," I said, "we can never hope to keep her in ignorance of the change in you, when the change comes. Sooner or later, some one will let the secret out."

"I only want it to be concealed from her while the disfigurement of me is in progress," he answered. "When nothing she can say or do will alter it--I will tell her myself. She is so happy in the hope of my recovery! What good can be gained by telling her beforehand of the penalty that I pay for my deliverance? My ugly color will never terrify my poor darling. As for other persons, I shall not force myself on the view of the world. It is my one wish to live out of the world. The few people about me will soon get reconciled to my face. Lucilla will set them the example. She won't trouble herself long about a change in me that she can neither feel nor see."

Ought I to have warned him here of Lucilla's inveterate prejudice, and of the difficulty there might be in reconciling her to the change in him when she heard of it? I dare say I ought, I daresay I was to blame in shrinking from inflicting new anxieties and new distresses on a man who had already suffered so much. The simple truth is--I could not do it. Would you have done it? Ah, if you would, I hope I may never come in contact with you. What a horrid wretch you must be! The end of it was that I left the house--pledged to keep Lucilla in ignorance of the cost at which Oscar had determined to purchase his cure, until Oscar thought fit to enlighten her himself.