

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

Good Papa again!

THE promise I had given did not expose me to the annoyance of being kept long on the watch against accidents. If we could pass safely over the next five days, we might feel pretty sure of the future. On the last day of the old year, Lucilla was bound by the terms of the will to go to London, and live her allotted three months under the roof of her aunt.

In the brief interval that elapsed before her departure, she twice approached the dangerous subject.

On the first occasion, she asked me if I knew what medicine Oscar was taking. I pleaded ignorance, and passed at once to other matters. On the second occasion, she advanced still further on the way to discovery of the truth. She now inquired if I had heard how the physic worked the cure. Having been already informed that the fits proceeded from a certain disordered condition of the brain, she was anxious to know whether the medical treatment was likely to affect the patient's head. This question (which I was of course unable to answer) she put to both the doctors. Already warned by Oscar, they quieted her by declaring that the process of cure acted by general means, and did not attack the head. From that moment, her curiosity was satisfied. Her mind had other objects of interest to dwell on, before she left Dimchurch. She touched on the perilous topic no more.

It was arranged that I was to accompany Lucilla to London. Oscar was to follow us, when the state of his health permitted him to take the journey. As betrothed husband of Lucilla, he had his right of entry, during her residence in her aunt's house. As for me, I was admitted at Lucilla's intercession. She declined to be separated from me for three months.

Miss Batchford wrote, most politely, to offer me a hospitable welcome during the day. She had no second spare-room at her disposal--so we settled that I was to sleep at a lodging-house in the neighborhood. In this same house, Oscar was also to be accommodated, when the doctors sanctioned his removal to London. It was now thought likely--if all went well--that the marriage might be celebrated at the end of the three months, from Miss Batchford's residence in town.

Three days before the date of Lucilla's departure, these plans--so far as I was concerned in them--were all over-thrown.

A letter from Paris reached me, with more bad news. My absence had produced the worst possible effect on good Papa.

The moment my influence had been removed, he had become perfectly unmanageable. My sisters assured me that the abominable woman from whom I had rescued him, would most certainly end in marrying him after all, unless I reappeared immediately on the scene. What was to be done? Nothing was to be done, but to fly into a rage--to grind my teeth, and throw down all my things, in the solitude of my own room--and then to go back to Paris.

Lucilla behaved charmingly. When she saw how angry and how distressed I was, she suppressed all exhibition of disappointment on her side, with the truest and kindest consideration for my feelings. "Write to me often," said the charming creature, "and come back to me as soon as you can." Her father took her to London. Two days before they left, I said good-bye at the rectory and at Browndown; and started--once more by the Newhaven and Dieppe route--for Paris.

I was in no humour (as your English saying is) to mince matters, in controlling this new outbreak on the part of my evergreen parent. I insisted on instantly removing him from Paris, and taking him on a continental tour. I was proof against his paternal embraces; I was deaf to his noble sentiments. He declared he should die on the road. When I look back at it now, I am amazed at my own cruelty. I said, "En route, Papa!"--and packed him up, and took him to Italy.

He became enamored, at intervals, now of one fair traveler and now of another, all through the journey from Paris to Rome. (Wonderful old man!) Arrived at Rome--that hotbed of the enemies of mankind--I saw my way to putting a moral extinguisher on the author of my being. The Eternal City contains three hundred and sixty-five churches, and (say) three million and sixty-five pictures. I insisted on his seeing them all--at the advanced age of seventy-five years! The sedative result followed, exactly as I had anticipated. I stupefied good Papa with churches and pictures--and then I tried him with a marble woman to begin with. He fell asleep before the Venus of the Capitol. When I saw that, I said to myself, Now he will do; Don Juan is reformed at last.

Lucilla's correspondence with me--at first cheerful--gradually assumed a

desponding tone.

Six weeks had passed since her departure from Dimchurch; and still Oscar's letters held out no hope of his being able to join her in London. His recovery was advancing, but not so rapidly as his medical adviser had anticipated. It was possible--to look the worst in the face boldly--that he might not get the doctor's permission to leave Browndown before the time arrived for Lucilla's return to the rectory. In this event, he could only entreat her to be patient, and to remember that though he was gaining ground but slowly, he was still getting on. Under these circumstances, Lucilla was naturally vexed and dejected. She had never (she wrote), from her girlhood upward, spent such a miserable time with her aunt as she was spending now.

On reading this letter, I instantly smelt something wrong.

I corresponded with Oscar almost as frequently as with Lucilla. His last letter to me flatly contradicted his last letter to his promised wife. In writing to my address, he declared himself to be rapidly advancing towards recovery. Under the new treatment, the fits succeeded each other at longer and longer intervals, and endured a shorter and shorter time. Here then was plainly a depressing report sent to Lucilla, and an encouraging report sent to me.

What did it mean?

Oscar's next letter to me answered the question.

"I told you in my last" (he wrote), "that the discoloration of my skin had begun. The complexion which you were once so good as to admire, has disappeared for ever. I am now of a livid ashen color--so like death, that I sometimes startle myself when I look in the glass. In about six weeks more, as the doctor calculates, this will deepen to a blackish blue; and then, 'the saturation' (as he calls it) will be complete.

"So far from feeling any useless regrets at having taken the medicine which is producing these ugly effects, I am more grateful to my Nitrate of Silver than words can say. If you ask for the secret of this extraordinary exhibition of philosophy on my part, I can give it in one line. For the last ten days, I have not had a fit. In other words, for the last ten days, I have lived in Paradise. I declare I would have cheerfully lost an arm or a leg to gain the blessed peace of mind, the intoxicating confidence in the future--it is nothing less--that I feel now.

"Still there is a drawback which prevents me from enjoying perfect tranquillity even yet. When was there ever a pleasure in this world, without a lurking possibility of pain hidden away in it somewhere?"

"I have lately discovered a peculiarity in Lucilla which is new to me, and which has produced a very unpleasant impression on my mind. My proposed avowal to her of the change in my personal appearance, has now become a matter of far more serious difficulty than I had anticipated when the question was discussed between you and me at Browndown.

"Have you ever found out that the strongest antipathy she has, is her purely imaginary antipathy to dark people and to dark shades of color of all kinds? This strange prejudice is the result, as I suppose, of some morbid growth of her blindness, quite as inexplicable to herself as to other people. Explicable, or not, there it is in her. Read the extract that follows from one of her letters to her father, which her father showed to me--and you will not be surprised to hear that I tremble for myself when the time comes for telling her what I have done.

"Thus she writes to Mr. Finch:--

"I am sorry to say, I have had a little quarrel with my aunt. It is all made up now, but it has hardly left us such good friends as we were before. Last week, there was a dinner-party here; and, among the guests, was a Hindoo gentleman (converted to Christianity) to whom my aunt has taken a great fancy. While the maid was dressing me, I unluckily inquired if she had seen the Hindoo--and, hearing that she had, I still more unfortunately asked her to tell me what he was like. She described him as being very tall and lean, with a dark brown complexion and glittering black eyes. My mischievous fancy instantly set to work on this horrid combination of darkneses. Try as I might to resist it, my mind drew a dreadful picture of the Hindoo, as a kind of monster in human form. I would have given worlds to have been excused from going down into the drawing-room. At the last moment I was sent for, and the Hindoo was introduced to me. The instant I felt him approaching, my darkness was peopled with brown demons. He took my hand. I tried hard to control myself--but I really could not help shuddering and starting back when he touched me. To make matters worse, he sat next to me at dinner. In five minutes I had long, lean, black-eyed beings all round me; perpetually growing in numbers, and pressing closer and closer on me as they grew. It ended in my being obliged to leave the table. When the guests were all gone, my aunt was furious. I admitted my conduct was unreasonable in the last degree. At the same time, I begged her to make allowances for me. I reminded her that I was blind at a year old, and that I

had really no idea of what any person was like, except by drawing pictures of them in my imagination, from description, and from my own knowledge obtained by touch. I appealed to her to remember that, situated as I am, my fancy is peculiarly liable to play me tricks, and that I have no sight to see with, and to show me--as other people's eyes show them--when they have taken a false view of persons and things. It was all in vain. My aunt would admit of no excuse for me. I was so irritated by her injustice, that I reminded her of an antipathy of her own, quite as ridiculous as mine--an antipathy to cats. She, who can see that cats are harmless, shudders and turns pale, for all that, if a cat is in the same room with her. Set my senseless horror of dark people against her senseless horror of cats--and say which of us has the right to be angry with the other?"

Such was the quotation from Lucilla's letter to her father. At the end of it, Oscar resumed, as follows:--

"I wonder whether you will now understand me, if I own to you that I have made the worst of my case in writing to Lucilla? It is the only excuse I can produce for not joining her in London. Weary as I am of our long separation, I cannot prevail on myself to run the risk of meeting her in the presence of strangers, who would instantly notice my frightful color, and betray it to her. Think of her shuddering and starting back from my hand when it took hers! No! no! I must choose my own opportunity, in this quiet place, of telling her what (I suppose) must be told--with time before me to prepare her mind for the disclosure (if it must come), and with nobody but you near to see the first mortifying effect of the shock which I shall inflict on her.

"I have only to add, before I release you, that I write these lines in the strictest confidence. You have promised not to mention my disfigurement to Lucilla, unless I first give you leave. I now, more than ever, hold you to that promise. The few people about me here, are all pledged to secrecy as you are. If it is really inevitable that she should know the truth--I alone must tell it; in my own way, and at my own time."

"If it must come," "if it is really inevitable"--these phrases in Oscar's letter satisfied me that he was already beginning to comfort himself with an insanely delusive idea--the idea that it might be possible permanently to conceal the ugly personal change in him from Lucilla's knowledge.

If I had been at Dimchurch, I have no doubt I should have begun to feel seriously uneasy at the turn which things appeared to be taking now.

But distance has a very strange effect in altering one's customary way of thinking of affairs at home. Being in Italy instead of in England, I dismissed Lucilla's antipathies and Oscar's scruples, as both alike unworthy of serious consideration. Sooner or later, time (I considered) would bring these two troublesome young people to their senses. Their marriage would follow, and there would be an end of it! In the meanwhile, I continued to feast good Papa on Holy Families and churches. Ah, poor dear, how he yawned over Caraccis and cupolas! and how fervently he promised never to fall in love again, if I would only take him back to Paris!

We set our faces homeward a day or two after the receipt of Oscar's letter. I left my reformed father, resting his aching old bones in his own easy-chair; capable perhaps, even yet, of contracting a Platonic attachment to a lady of his own time of life--but capable (as I firmly believed) of nothing more. "Oh, my child, let me rest!" he said, when I wished him good-bye. "And never show me a church or a picture again as long as I live!"