

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST

Madame Pratolungo Returns to Dimchurch

I REACHED London in the last week of Lucilla's residence under her aunt's roof, and waited in town until it was time to take her back to Dimchurch.

As soon as it had become obviously too late for Oscar to risk the dreaded meeting with Lucilla before strangers, his correspondence had, as a matter of course, assumed a brighter tone. She was in high spirits once more, poor thing, when we met--and full of delight at having me near her again. We thoroughly enjoyed our few days in London--and took our fill of music at operas and concerts. I got on excellently well with the aunt until the last day, when something happened which betrayed me into an avowal of my political convictions.

The old lady's consternation, when she discovered that I looked hopefully forward to a coming extermination of kings and priests, and a general redistribution of property all over the civilized globe, is unutterable in words. On that occasion, I made one more aristocrat tremble. I also closed Miss Batchford's door on me for the rest of my life. No matter! The day is coming when the Batchford branch of humanity will not possess a door to close. All Europe is drifting nearer and nearer to the Pratolungo programme. Cheer up, my brothers without land, and my sisters without money in the Funds! We will have it out with the infamous rich yet. Long live the Republic!

Early in the month of April, Lucilla and I took leave of the Metropolis, and went back to Dimchurch.

As we drew nearer and nearer to the rectory, as Lucilla began to flush and fidget in eager anticipation of her re-union with Oscar, that uneasiness of mind which I had so readily dismissed while I was in Italy, began to find its way back to me again. My imagination now set to work at drawing pictures--startling pictures of Oscar as a changed being, as a Medusa's head too terrible to be contemplated by mortal eyes. Where would he meet us? At the entrance to the village? No. At the rectory gate? No. In the quieter part of the garden which was at the back of the house? Yes! There he stood waiting for us--alone!

Lucilla flew into his arms with a cry of delight. I stood behind and looked at them.

Ah, how vividly I remember--at the moment when she embraced him--the first shock of seeing the two faces together! The drug had done its work. I saw her fair cheek laid innocently against the livid blackish blue of his discolored skin. Heavens, how cruelly that first embrace marked the contrast between what he had been when I left him, and what he had changed to when I saw him now! His eyes turned from her face to mine, in silent appeal to me while he held her in his arms. Their look told me the thought in him, as eloquently as if he had put it into words. "You, who love her, say--can we ever be cruel enough to tell her of this?"

I approached to take his hand. At the same moment, Lucilla suddenly drew back from him, laid her left hand on his shoulder, and passed her right hand rapidly over his face.

For an instant I felt my heart stand still. Her miraculous sensitiveness of touch had detected the dark color of my dress, on the day when we first met. Would it serve her, this time, as truly as it had served her then?

She paused, after the first passage of her fingers over his face, with the breathless attention to what she was about, which, in my own case, I remembered so well. A second time, she passed her hand over him--considered again--and turned my way next.

"What does his face tell you?" she asked. "It tells me that he has something on his mind. What is it?"

We were safe--so far! The hateful medicine, in altering the color, had not affected the texture, of his skin. As her touch had left it on her departure, so her touch found it again, on her return.

Before I could reply to Lucilla, Oscar answered for himself.

"Nothing is wrong, my darling," he said. "My nerves are a little out of order to-day; and the joy of seeing you again has overcome me for the moment--that is all."

She shook her head impatiently.

"No," she said, "it's not all." She touched his heart. "Why is it beating so fast?" She took his hand in hers. "Why has it turned so cold? I must know. I will know! Come indoors."

At that awkward moment, the most wearisome of living men suddenly proved himself to be the most welcome of living men. The rector appeared in the garden, to receive his daughter on her return. Enfolded in Reverend Finch's paternal embraces; harangued by Reverend Finch's prodigious voice, Lucilla was effectually silenced--the subject was inevitably changed. Oscar drew me aside out of hearing, while her attention was diverted from him.

"I saw you," he said. "You were horrified at the first sight of me. You were relieved when you found that her touch told her nothing. Help me to keep her from suspecting it, for two months more--and you will be the best friend that ever man had."

"Two months?" I repeated.

"Yes. If there is no return of the fits in two months, the doctor will consider my recovery complete. Lucilla and I may be married at the end of the time."

"My friend Oscar, are you contemplating a fraud on Lucilla?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come! come! you know what I mean! Is it honorable first to entrap her into marrying you--and then to confess to her the color of your face?"

He sighed bitterly.

"I shall fill her with horror of me, if I confess it. Look at me! look at me!" he said, lifting his ghastly hands in despair to his blue face.

I was determined not to give way--even to that.

"Be a man!" I said. "Own it boldly. What is she going to marry you for? For your face that she can never see? No! For your heart that is one with her own. Trust to her natural good sense--and, better than that, to the devoted love that you have inspired in her. She will see her stupid prejudice in its true light, when she feels it trying to part her from you."

"No! no! no! Remember her letter to her father. I shall lose her for ever, if I tell her now!"

I took his arm, and endeavored to lead him to Lucilla. She as already trying to escape from her father; she was already longing to hear the sound of Oscar's voice again.

He obstinately shrank back. I began to feel angry with him. In another moment, I should have said or done something that I might have repented of afterwards--if a new interruption had not happened before I could open my lips.

Another person appeared in the garden--the man-servant from Browndown; with a letter for his master in his hand.

"This has just come, sir," said the man, "by the afternoon post. It is marked 'Immediate.' I thought I had better bring it to you here."

Oscar took the letter, and looked at the address. "My brother's writing!" he exclaimed. "A letter from Nugent!"

He opened the letter--and burst out with a cry of joy which brought Lucilla instantly to his side.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Nugent is coming back! Nugent will be here in a week! Oh, Lucilla! my brother is coming to stay with me at Browndown!"

He caught her in his arms, and kissed her, in the first rapture of receiving that welcome news. She forced herself away from him without answering a word. She turned her poor blind face round and round, in the search for me.

"Here I am!" I said.

She roughly and angrily put her arm in mine. I saw the jealous misery in her face as she dragged me away with her to the house. Never yet had Oscar's voice, in her experience of him, sounded the note of happiness that she heard in it now! Never yet had she felt Oscar's heart on Oscar's lips, as she felt it when he kissed her in the first joy of anticipating Nugent's return!

"Can he hear me?" she whispered, when we had left the lawn, and she felt the gravel under her feet.

"No. What is it?"

"I hate his brother!"