

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND

The Twin-Brother's Letter

LITTLE thinking what a storm he had raised, poor innocent Oscar--paternally escorted by the rector--followed us into the house, with his open letter in his hand.

Judging by certain signs visible in my reverend friend, I concluded that the announcement of Nugent Dubourg's coming visit to Dimchurch--regarded by the rest of us as heralding the appearance of a twin-brother--was regarded by Mr. Finch as promising the arrival of a twin-fortune. Oscar and Nugent shared the comfortable paternal inheritance. Finch smelt money.

"Compose yourself," I whispered to Lucilla as the two gentlemen followed us into the sitting-room. "Your jealousy of his brother is a childish jealousy. There is room enough in his heart for his brother as well as for you."

She only repeated obstinately, with a vicious pinch on my arm, "I hate his brother!"

"Come and sit down by me," said Oscar, approaching her on the other side. "I want to run over Nugent's letter. It's so interesting! There is a message in it to you." Too deeply absorbed in his subject to notice the sullen submission with which she listened to him, he placed her on a chair, and began reading. "The first lines," he explained, "relate to Nugent's return to England, and to his delightful idea of coming to stay with me at Browndown. Then he goes on: 'I found all your letters waiting for me on my return to New York. Need I tell you, my dearest brother----'"

Lucilla stopped him at those words by rising abruptly from her seat.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"I don't like this chair!"

Oscar got her another--an easy-chair this time--and returned to the letter.

"Need I tell you, my dearest brother, how deeply you have interested me by the announcement of your contemplated marriage? Your happiness is my happiness. I feel with you; I congratulate you; I long to see my future sister-

in-law----"

Lucilla got up again. Oscar, in astonishment, asked what was wrong now?

"I am not comfortable at this end of the room."

She walked to the other end of the room. Patient Oscar walked after her, with his precious letter in his hand. He offered her a third chair. She petulantly declined to take it, and selected another chair for herself. Oscar returned to the letter:--

"How melancholy, and yet how interesting it is, to hear that she is blind! My sketches of American scenery happened to be lying about in the room when I read your letter. The first thought that came to me, on hearing of Miss Finch's affliction, was suggested by my sketches. I said to myself, "Sad! sad! my sister-in-law will never see my Works." The true artist, Oscar, is always thinking of his Works. I shall bring back, let me tell you, some very remarkable studies for future pictures. They will not be so numerous, perhaps, as you may expect. I prefer to trust to my intellectual perception of beauty, rather than to mere laborious transcripts from Nature. In certain moods of mine (speaking as an artist) Nature puts me out." There Oscar paused, and appealed to me. "What writing!--eh? I always told you, Madame Pratolungo, that Nugent was a genius. You see it now. Don't get up, Lucilla. I am going on. There is a message to you in this part of the letter. So neatly expressed!"

Lucilla persisted in getting up; the announcement of the neatly-expressed message to be read next, produced no effect on her. She walked to the window, and trifled impatiently with the flowers placed in it. Oscar looked in mild astonishment, first at me--then at the rector. Reverend Finch--listening thus far with the complimentary attention due to the correspondence of one young man of fortune with another young man of fortune--interfered in Oscar's interests, to secure him a patient hearing.

"My dear Lucilla, endeavor to control your restlessness. You interfere with our enjoyment of this interesting letter. I could wish to see fewer changes of place, my child, and a more undivided attention to what Oscar is reading to you."

"I am not interested in what he is reading to me." In the nervous irritation which produced this ungracious answer, she overthrew one of the flower-pots. Oscar set it up again for her with undiminished good-temper.

"Not interested!" he exclaimed. "Wait a little. You haven't heard Nugent's message yet. Listen to this! 'Present my best and kindest regards to the future Mrs. Oscar' (dear fellow!); 'and say that she has given me a new interest in hastening my return to England.' There! Isn't that prettily put? Come Lucilla! own that Nugent is worth listening to when he writes about you!"

She turned towards him for the first time. The charm of the tone in which he spoke those words subdued her, in spite of herself.

"I am much obliged to your brother," she answered gently, "and very much ashamed of myself for what I said just now." She stole her hand into his, and whispered, "You are so fond of Nugent--I begin to be almost afraid there will be no love left for me."

Oscar was enchanted. "Wait till you see him, and you will be as fond of him as I am," he said. "Nugent is not like me. He fascinates people the moment they come in contact with him. Nobody can resist Nugent."

She still held his hand, with a perplexed and saddened face. The admirable absence of any jealousy on his side--his large and generous confidence in her love for him--was just the rebuke to her that she could feel; just the rebuke also (in my opinion) that she had deserved.

"Go on, Oscar," said the rector, in his deepest notes of encouragement. "What next, dear boy? what next?"

"Another interesting bit, of quite a new kind," Oscar replied. "There is a little mystery to stir us up on the last page of the letter. Nugent says:--'I have become acquainted (here, in New York) with a very remarkable man, a German who has made a great deal of money in the United States. He proposes visiting England early in the present year; and he will write and let me know when he has arrived. I shall feel particular pleasure in presenting him to you and your future wife. It is quite possible that you may have special reason to congratulate yourselves on making his acquaintance. For the present, no more of my new friend until we meet at Browndown.'--'Special reason to congratulate ourselves on making his acquaintance.'" repeated Oscar, folding up the letter. "Nugent never writes in that way without a reason for it. Who can the German gentleman be?"

Mr. Finch suddenly lifted his head, and looked at Oscar with a certain appearance of alarm.

"Your brother mentions that he has made his fortune in America," said the Reverend gentleman. "I hope he is not connected with the money-market. He might infect Mr. Nugent with the spirit of reckless speculation which is, so to speak, the national sin of the United States. Your brother, having no doubt the same generous disposition as yours----"

"A far finer disposition than mine, Mr. Finch," interposed Oscar.

"Possessed, like you, of the gifts of fortune," proceeded the rector, with mounting enthusiasm.

"Once possessed of them," said Oscar. "Far from being overburdened with the gifts of fortune, now!"

"What!!!" cried Mr. Finch, with a start of consternation.

"Nugent has run through his fortune," proceeded Oscar, quite composedly. "I lent him the money to go to America. My brother is a genius, Mr. Finch. When did you ever hear of a genius who could keep within limits? Nugent is not content to live in my humble way. He has the tastes of a prince--money is nothing to him. It doesn't matter. He will make a new fortune Out of his pictures; and, in the meantime, you know, I can always lend him something to go on with."

Mr. Finch rose from his seat, with the air of a man whose just anticipations have not been realized--whose innocent confidence has been scandalously betrayed. Here was a prospect! Another person in perpetual want of money, going to settle under the shadow of the rectory! Another man likely to borrow of Oscar--and that man his brother!

"I fail to take your light view of your brother's extravagance," said the rector, addressing Oscar with his loftiest severity of manner, at the door. "I deplore and reprehend Mr. Nugent's misuse of the bounty bestowed on him by an all-wise Providence. You will do well to consider, before you encourage your brother's extravagance by lending him money. What does the great poet of humanity say of lenders? The Bard of Avon tells us, that 'loan oft loses both itself and friend.' Lay that noble line to heart, Oscar! Lucilla, be on your guard against that restlessness which I have already had occasion to reprove. I find I must leave you, Madame Pratolungo. I had forgotten my parish duties. My parish duties are waiting for me. Good day! good day!"

He looked round on us all three, in turn, with a very sour face, and walked out. "Surely," I thought to myself, "this brother of Oscar's is not beginning

well! First, the daughter takes offense at him, and now the father follows her example. Even on the other side of the Atlantic, Mr. Nugent Dubourg exercises a malignant influence, and disturbs the family tranquillity before he has shown his nose in the house!"

Nothing more that is worth recording happened on that day. We had a very dull evening. Lucilla was out of spirits. As for me, I had not yet had time to accustom myself to the shocking spectacle of Oscar's discolored face. I was serious and silent. You would never have guessed me to be a Frenchwoman, if you had seen me for the first time on the occasion of my return to the rectory.

The next day a small domestic event happened, which must be chronicled in this place.

Our Dimchurch doctor, always dissatisfied with his position in an obscure country place, had obtained an appointment in India which offered great professional advantages to an ambitious man. He called to take leave of us on his departure. I found an opportunity of speaking to him about Oscar. He entirely agreed with me that the attempt to keep the change produced in his former patient by the Nitrate of Silver from Lucilla's knowledge, was simply absurd. The truth would reach her, he said, before many days were over our heads. With that prediction, addressed to my private ear, he left us. The removal of him from the scene was, you will please to bear in mind, the removal of an important local witness to the medical treatment of Oscar, and was, as such, an incident with a bearing of its own on the future, which claims a place for it in the present narrative.

Two more days passed, and nothing happened. On the morning of the third day, the doctor's prophecy was all but fulfilled, through the medium of the wandering Arab of the family, our funny little Jicks.

While Lucilla and I were strolling about the garden with Oscar, the child suddenly darted out on us from behind a tree, and, seizing Oscar round the legs, hailed him affectionately at the top of her voice as "The Blue Man!" Lucilla instantly stopped, and said, "Who do you call 'The Blue Man'?" Jicks answered boldly, "Oscar." Lucilla caught the child up in her arms. "Why do you call Oscar 'The Blue Man'?" she asked. Jicks pointed to Oscar's face, and then, remembering Lucilla's blindness, appealed to me. "You tell her!" said Jicks, in high glee. Oscar seized my hand, and looked at me imploringly. I determined not to interfere. It was bad enough to remain

passive, and to let her be kept in the dark. Actively, I was resolved to take no part in deceiving her. Her color rose; she put Jicks down on the ground. "Are you both dumb?" she asked. "Oscar! I insist on knowing it--how have you got the nick-name of 'The Blue Man'?" Left helpless, Oscar (to my disgust) took refuge in a lie--and, worse still, a clumsy lie. He declared that he had got his nick-name in the nursery, at the time of Lucilla's absence in London, by one day painting his face in the character of Bluebeard to amuse the children! If Lucilla had felt the faintest suspicion of the truth, blind as she was, she must now have discovered it. As things were, Oscar annoyed and irritated her. I could see that it cost her a struggle to suppress something like a feeling of contempt for him. "Amuse the children, the next time, in some other way," she said. "Though I can't see you, still I don't like to hear of your disfiguring your face by painting it blue." With that answer, she walked away a little by herself, evidently disappointed in her betrothed husband for the first time in her experience of him.

He cast another imploring look at me. "Did you hear what she said about my face?" he whispered.

"You have lost an excellent opportunity of speaking out," I answered. "I believe you will bitterly regret the folly and the cruelty of deceiving her."

He shook his head, with the immovable obstinacy of a weak man.

"Nugent doesn't think as you do," he said, handing me the letter. "Read that bit there--now Lucilla is out of hearing."

I paused for a moment before I could read. The resemblance between the twins extended even to their handwritings! If I had picked Nugent's letter up, I should have handed it to Oscar as a letter of Oscar's own writing.

The paragraph to which he pointed, only contained these lines:--"Your last relieves my anxiety about your health. I entirely agree with you that any personal sacrifice which cures you of those horrible attacks is a sacrifice wisely made. As to your keeping the change a secret from the young lady, I can only say that I suppose you know best how to act in this emergency. I will abstain from forming any opinion of my own until we meet."

I handed Oscar back the letter.

"There is no very warm approval there of the course you are taking," I said. "The only difference between your brother and me is, that he suspends his opinion, and that I express mine."

"I have no fear of my brother," Oscar answered. "Nugent will feel for me, and understand me, when he comes to Browndown. In the meantime, this shall not happen again."

He stooped over Jicks. The child, while we were talking, had laid herself down luxuriously on the grass, and was singing to herself little snatches of a nursery song. Oscar pulled her up on her legs rather roughly. He was out of temper with her, as well as with himself.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I am going to see Mr. Finch," he answered, "and to have Jicks kept for the future out of Lucilla's garden."

"Does Mr. Finch approve of your silence?"

"Mr. Finch, Madame Pratolungo, leaves me to decide on a matter which concerns nobody but Lucilla and myself."

After that reply, there was an end of all further remonstrance from me, as a matter of course.

Oscar walked off with his prisoner to the house. Jicks trotted along by his side, unconscious of the mischief she had done, singing another verse of the nursery song. I rejoined Lucilla, with my mind made up as to the line of conduct I should adopt in the future. If Oscar did succeed in keeping the truth concealed from her, I was positively resolved, come what might of it, to enlighten her before they were married, with my own lips. What! after pledging myself to keep the secret? Yes. Perish the promise which makes me false to a person whom I love! I despise such promises from the bottom of my heart.

Two days more slipped by--and then a telegram found its way to Browndown. Oscar came running to us, at the rectory, with his news. Nugent had landed at Liverpool. Oscar was to expect him at Dimchurch on the next day.