

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH

He sees Lucilla

THE first impression which poor Miss Finch produced on Nugent Dubourg, was precisely the same as the first impression which she had produced on me.

"Good Heavens!" he cried. "The Dresden Madonna! The Virgin of San Sisto!"

Lucilla had already heard from me of her extraordinary resemblance to the chief figure in Raphael's renowned picture. Nugent's blunt outburst of recognition passed unnoticed by her. She stopped short, in the middle of the room--startled, the instant he spoke, by the extraordinary similarity of his tone and accent to the tone and accent of his brother's voice.

"Oscar," she asked nervously, "are you behind me? or in front of me?" Oscar laughed, and answered "Here!"--speaking behind her. She turned her head towards the place in front of her, from which Nugent had spoken. "Your voice is wonderfully like Oscar's," she said, addressing him timidly. "Is your face exactly like his face, too? May I judge for myself of the likeness between you? I can only do it in one way--by my touch."

Oscar advanced, and placed a chair for his brother by Lucilla's side.

"She has eyes in the tips of her fingers," he said. "Sit down, Nugent, and let her pass her hand over your face."

Nugent obeyed him in silence. Now that the first impression of surprise had passed away, I observed that a marked change was beginning to assert itself in his manner.

Little by little, an unnatural constraint got possession of him. His fluent tongue found nothing to talk about. His easy movements altered in the strangest way, until they almost became the movements of a slow awkward man. He was more like his brother than ever, as he sat down in the chair to submit himself to Lucilla's investigation. She had produced, at first sight--as well as I could judge--some impression on him for which he had not been prepared; causing some mental disturbance in him which he was for the moment quite unable to control. His eyes looked up at her, spell-bound; his color came and went; his breath quickened audibly when her fingers

touched his face.

"What's the matter?" said Oscar, looking at him in surprise.

"Nothing is the matter," he answered, in the low absent tone of a man whose mind was secretly pursuing its own train of thought.

Oscar said no more. Once, twice, three times, Lucilla's hand passed slowly over Nugent's face. He submitted to it, silently, gravely, immovably--a perfect contrast to the talkative, lively young man of half an hour since. Lucilla employed a much longer time in examining him than she had occupied in examining me.

While the investigation was proceeding, I had leisure to think again over what had passed between Nugent and me on the subject of Lucilla's blindness, before she entered the room. My mind had by this time recovered its balance. I was able to ask myself what this young fellow's daring idea was really worth. Was it within the range of possibility that a sense so delicate as the sense of sight, lost for one-and-twenty years, could be restored by any means short of a miracle? It was monstrous to suppose it: the thing could not be. If there had been the faintest chance of giving my poor dear back the blessing of sight, that chance would have been tried by competent persons years and years since. I was ashamed of myself for having been violently excited at the moment by the new thought which Nugent had started in my mind; I was honestly indignant at his uselessly disturbing me with the vainest of all vain hopes. The one wise thing to do in the future, was to caution this flighty and inconsequent young man to keep his mad notion about Lucilla to himself--and to dismiss it from my own thoughts, at once and for ever.

Just as I arrived at that sensible resolution, I was recalled to what was going on in the room, by Lucilla's voice, addressing me by my name.

"The likeness is wonderful," she said. "Still, I think I can find a difference between them."

(The only difference between them was in the contrast of complexion and in the contrast of manner--both these being dissimilarities which appealed more or less directly to the eye.)

"What difference do you find?" I asked.

She slowly came towards me, with an anxious perplexed face; pondering as

she advanced.

"I can't explain it," she answered--after a long silence.

When Lucilla left him, Nugent rose from his chair. He abruptly--almost roughly--took his brother's hand. He spoke to his brother in a strangely excited, feverish, headlong way.

"My dear fellow, now I have seen her, I congratulate you more heartily than ever. She is charming; she is unique. Oscar! I could almost envy you, if you were anyone else!"

Oscar was radiant with delight. His brother's opinion ranked above all human opinions in his estimation. Before he could say a word in return, Nugent left him as abruptly as he had approached him; walking away by himself to the window--and standing there, looking out.

Lucilla had not heard him. She was still pondering, with the same perplexed face. The likeness between the twins was apparently weighing on her mind--an unsolved problem that vexed and irritated it. Without anything said by me to lead to resuming the subject, she returned obstinately to the assertion that she had just made.

"I tell you again I am sensible of a difference between them," she repeated--"though you don't seem to believe me."

I interpreted this uneasy reiteration as meaning that she was rather trying to convince herself than to convince me. In her blind condition, it was doubly and trebly embarrassing not to know one brother from the other. I understood her unwillingness to acknowledge this--I felt (in her position) how it would have irritated me. She was waiting--impatiently waiting--for me to say something on my side. I am, as you know already, an indiscreet woman. I innocently said one of my rash things.

"I believe whatever you tell me, my dear," I answered. "You can find out a difference between them, I have no doubt. Still, I own I should like to see it put to the proof."

Her color rose. "How?" she asked abruptly.

"Try your touch alternately on both their faces," I suggested, "without knowing beforehand which position they each of them occupy. Make three trials--leaving them to change their places or not, between each trial, just as

they please. If you guess which is which correctly three times following, there will be the proof that you can really lay your hand on a difference between them."

Lucilla shrank from accepting the challenge. She drew back a step, and silently shook her head. Nugent, who had overheard me, turned round suddenly from the window, and supported my proposal.

"A capital notion!" he burst out. "Let's try it! You don't object, Oscar--do you?"

"I object?" cried Oscar--amazed at the bare idea of his opposing any assertion of his will to the assertion of his brother's will. "If Lucilla is willing, I say Yes, with all my heart."

The two brothers approached us, arm in arm. Lucilla, very reluctantly, allowed herself to be persuaded into trying the experiment. Two chairs, exactly alike, were placed in front of her. At a sign from Nugent, Oscar silently took the chair on her right. By this arrangement, the hand which she had used in touching Nugent's face, would be now the hand that she would employ in touching Oscar's face. When they were both seated, I announced that we were ready. Lucilla placed her hands on their faces, right and left, without the faintest idea in her mind of the positions which the two relatively occupied.

After first touching them with both hands, and both together, she tried them separately next, beginning with Oscar, and using her right hand only. She left him for Nugent; again using her right hand--then came back to him again--then returned to Nugent--hesitated---decided--tapped Nugent lightly on the head.

"Oscar!" she said.

Nugent burst out laughing. The laugh told her, before any of us could speak, that she had made a mistake at the first attempt.

"Try again, Lucilla," said Oscar kindly.

"Never!" she answered, angrily stepping back from both of them. "One mystification is enough."

Nugent tried next to persuade her to renew the experiment. She checked him sternly at the first word.

"Do you think if I won't do it for Oscar," she said, "that I would do it for you? You laughed at me. What was there to laugh at? Your brother's features are your features; your brother's hair is your hair; your brother's height is your height. What is there so very ridiculous--with such a resemblance as that--in a poor blind girl like me mistaking you one for the other? I wish to preserve a good opinion of you, for Oscar's sake. Don't turn me into ridicule again--or I shall be forced to think that your brother's good heart is not yours also!"

Nugent and Oscar looked at each other, petrified by this sudden outbreak; Nugent, of the two, being the most completely overwhelmed by it.

I attempted to interfere and put things right. My easy philosophy and my volatile French nature, failed to see any adequate cause for this vehement exhibition of resentment on Lucilla's part. Something in my tone, as I suppose, only added to her irritation. I, in my turn, was checked sternly at the first word. "You proposed it," she said; "You are the most to blame." I hastened to make my apologies (inwardly remarking that the habit of raising a storm in a tea-cup is a growing habit with the rising generation in England). Nugent followed me with more apologies on his side. Oscar supported us with his superior influence. He took Lucilla's hand--kissed it--and whispered something in her ear. The kiss and the whisper acted like a charm. She held out her hand to Nugent, she put her arm round my neck and embraced me, with all her own grace and sweetness. "Forgive me," she said to us gently. "I wish I could learn to be patient. But, oh, Mr. Nugent, it is sometimes so hard to be blind!" I can repeat the words; but I can give no idea of the touching simplicity with which they were spoken--of her innocently earnest anxiety to win her pardon. She so affected Nugent that he too--after a look at Oscar which said, "May I?"--kissed the hand that she offered to him. As his lips touched her, she started. The bright flush which always indicated the sudden rising of a thought in her mind, flew over her face. She unconsciously held Nugent's hand in her own, absorbed in the interest of realizing the new thought. For a moment, she stood, still as a statue, consulting with herself. The moment passed, she dropped Nugent's hand, and turned gaily to me.

"Will you think me very obstinate?" she asked.

"Why, my love?"

"I am not satisfied yet. I want to try again."

"No! no! At any rate not to-day."

"I want to try again," she repeated. "Not in your way. In a way of my own that has just come into my head." She turned to Oscar. "Will you humour me in this?" It is needless to set down Oscar's reply. She turned to Nugent. "Will you?"

"Only say what you wish me to do!" he answered.

"Go with your brother," she said, "to the other end of the room. I know where you are each of you standing, at this end. Madame Pratolungo will lead me to the place, and will put me just within reach of both your hands. I want each of you in turn (arrange by a sign between yourselves which is to begin) to take my hand, and hold it for a moment, and then drop it. I have an idea that I can distinguish between you, in that way--and I want very much to try it."

The brothers went silently to the other end of the room. I led Lucilla, after them, to the place in which they stood. At my suggestion, Nugent was the first to take her hand, as she had requested; to hold it for a moment, and then to drop it.

"Nugent!" she said, without the slightest hesitation.

"Quite right," I answered.

She laughed gaily. "Go on! Puzzle me if you possibly can."

The brothers noiselessly changed places. Oscar took her hand, standing exactly where Nugent had stood.

"Oscar!" she said.

"Right again," I told her.

At a sign from Nugent, Oscar took her hand for the second time. She repeated his name. At a sign from me, the brothers noiselessly placed themselves, one on either side of her--Oscar on the left; Nugent on the right. I gave them the signal; and they each took one of her hands at the same moment. This time, she waited a little longer before she spoke. When she did speak, she was right once more. She turned smiling, towards the left side, pointed to him as he stood by her, and said, "Oscar!"

We were all three equally surprised. I examined Oscar's hand and Nugent's hand alternately. Except the fatal difference in the color, they were, to all intents and purposes, the same hands--the same size, the same shape, the same texture of skin; no scar or mark on the hand of one to distinguish it from the hand of the other. By what mysterious process of divination had she succeeded in discovering which was which?

She was unwilling, or unable, to reply to that question plainly.

"Something in me answers to one of them and not to the other," she said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. It answers to Oscar. It doesn't answer to Nugent--that's all."

She stopped any further inquiries by proposing that we should finish the evening with some music, in her own sitting-room, on the other side of the house. When we were seated together at the pianoforte--with the twin-brothers established as our audience at the other end of the room--she whispered in my ear:

"I'll tell you!"

"Tell me what?"

"How I know which is which when they both of them take my hand. When Oscar takes it, a delicious tingle runs from his hand into mine, and steals all over me. I can't describe it any better than that."

"I understand. And when Nugent takes your hand, what do you feel?"

"Nothing!"

"And that is how you found out the difference between them down-stairs?"

"That is how I shall always find out the difference between them. If Oscar's brother ever attempts to play tricks upon my blindness (he is quite capable of it--he laughed at my blindness!), that is how I shall find him out. I told you before I saw him that I hated him. I hate him still."

"My dear Lucilla!"

"I hate him still!"

She struck the first chords on the piano, with an obstinate frown on her pretty brow. Our little evening concert began.