CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

Nugent puzzles Madame Pratolungo

I WAS far from sharing Lucilla's opinion of Nugent Dubourg. His enormous self-confidence was, to my mind, too amusing to be in the least offensive. I liked the spirit and gaiety of the young fellow. He came much nearer than his brother did to my ideal of the dash and resolution which ought to distinguish a man on the right side of thirty. So far as my experience of them went, Nugent was (in the popular English phrase) good company--and Oscar was not. My nationality leads me to attach great importance to social qualities. The higher virtues of a man only show themselves occasionally on compulsion, His social qualities come familiarly in contact with us every day of our lives. I like to be cheerful: I am all for the social qualities.

There was one little obstacle in those early days, which set itself up between my sympathies and Nugent.

I was thoroughly at a loss to understand the impression which Lucilla had produced on him.

The same constraint which had, in such a marked manner, subdued him at his first interview with her, still fettered him in the time when they became better acquainted with one another. He was never in high spirits in her presence. Mr. Finch could talk him down without difficulty, if Mr. Finch's daughter happened to be by. Even when he was vaporing about himself, and telling us of the wonderful things he meant to do in Painting, Lucilla's appearance was enough to check him, if she happened to come into the room. On the first day when he showed me his American sketches (I define them, if you ask my private opinion, as false pretenses of Art, by a dashing amateur)--on that day, he was in full flow; marching up and down the room, smacking his forehead, and announcing himself quite gravely as "the coming man" in landscape painting.

"My mission, Madame Pratolungo, is to reconcile Humanity and Nature. I propose to show (on an immense scale) how Nature (in her grandest aspects) can adapt herself to the spiritual wants of mankind. In your joy or your sorrow, Nature has subtle sympathies with you, if you only know where to look for them. My pictures--no! my poems in color--will show you. Multiply my works, as they certainly will be multiplied, by means of prints--and what does Art become in my hands? A Priesthood! In what aspect do I present

myself to the public? As a mere landscape painter? No! As Grand Consoler!" In the midst of this rhapsody (how wonderfully he resembled Oscar in his bursts of excitement while he was talking!)--in the full torrent of his predictions of his own coming greatness, Lucilla quietly entered the room. The "Grand Consoler" shut up his portfolio; dropped Painting on the spot; asked for Music, and sat down, a model of conventional propriety, in a corner of the room. I inquired afterwards, why he had checked himself when she came in. "Did I?" he said. "I don't know why." The thing was really inexplicable. He honestly admired her--one had only to notice him when he was looking at her to see it. He had not the faintest suspicion of her dislike for him--she carefully concealed it for Oscar's sake. He felt genuine sympathy for her in her affliction--his mad idea that her sight might yet be restored, was the natural offspring of a true feeling for her. He was not unfavorable to his brother's marriage--on the contrary, he ruffled the rector's dignity (he was always giving offense to Mr. Finch) by suggesting that the marriage might be hastened. I heard him say the words myself:--"The church is close by. Why can't you put on your surplice and make Oscar happy to-morrow, after breakfast?" More even than this, he showed the most vivid interest--like a woman's interest rather than a man's--in learning how the love-affair between Oscar and Lucilla had begun. I referred him, so far as Oscar was concerned, to his brother as the fountain-head of information. He did not decline to consult his brother. He did not own to me that he felt any difficulty in doing so. He simply dropped Oscar in silence; and asked about Lucilla. How had it begun on her side? I reminded him of his brother's romantic position at Dimchurch and told him to judge for himself of the effect it would produce on the excitable imagination of a young girl. He declined to judge for himself; he persisted in appealing to me. When I told the little love-story of the two young people, one event in it appeared to make a very strong impression on him. The effect produced on Lucilla (when she first heard it) by the sound of his brother's voice, dwelt strangely on his mind. He failed to understand it; he ridiculed it; he declined to believe it. I was obliged to remind him that Lucilla was blind, and that love which, in other cases, first finds its way to the heart through the eyes, could only, in her case, first find its way through the ears. My explanation, thus offered, had its effect: it set him thinking. "The sound of his voice!" he said to himself, still turning the problem over and over in his mind. "People say my voice is exactly like Oscar's," he added, suddenly addressing himself to me. "Do you think so too?" I answered that there could be no doubt of it. He got up from his chair, with a quick little shudder, like a man who feels a chill--and changed the subject. On the next occasion when he and Lucilla met--so far from being more familiar with her, he was more constrained than ever. As it had begun between these two, so it seemed likely to continue to the end. In my society, he was always at his ease. In Lucilla's society, never!

What was the obvious conclusion which a person with my experience ought to have drawn from all this?

I know well enough what it was, now. On my oath as an honest woman, I failed to see it at the time. We are not always (suffer me to remind you) consistent with ourselves. The cleverest people commit occasional lapses into stupidity--just as the stupid people light up with gleams of intelligence at certain times. You may have shown your usual good sense in conducting your affairs on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in the week. But it doesn't at all follow from this, that you may not make a fool of yourself on Thursday. Account for it as you may--for a much longer time than it suits my self-esteem to reckon up, I suspected nothing and discovered nothing. I noted his behavior in Lucilla's presence as odd behavior and unaccountable behavior--and that was all.

During the first fortnight just mentioned, the London doctor came to see Oscar.

He left again, perfectly satisfied with the results of his treatment. The dreadful epileptic malady would torture the patient and shock the friends about him no more: the marriage might safely be celebrated at the time agreed on. Oscar was cured.

The doctor's visit--reviving our interest in observing the effect of the medicine--also revived the subject of Oscar's false position towards Lucilla. Nugent and I held a debate about it between ourselves. I opened the interview by suggesting that we should unite our forces to persuade his brother into taking the frank and manly course. Nugent neither said Yes nor No to that proposal at the outset. He, who made up his mind at a moment's notice about everything else, took time to decide on this one occasion.

"There is something that I want to know first," he said. "I want to understand this curious antipathy of Lucilla's which my brother regards with so much alarm. Can you explain it?"

"Has Oscar attempted to explain it?" I inquired on my side.

"He mentioned it in one of his letters to me; and he tried to explain it, when I asked (on my arrival at Browndown) if Lucilla had discovered the change in his complexion. But he failed entirely to meet my difficulty in understanding

the case."

"What is your difficulty?"

"This. So far as I can see, she fails to discover intuitively the presence of dark people in a room, or of dark colors in the ornaments of a room. It is only when she is told that such persons or such things are present that her prejudice declares itself. In what state of mind does such a strange feeling as this take its rise? It seems impossible that she can have any conscious associations with colors, pleasant or painful--if it is true that she was blind at a year old. How do you account for it? Can there be such a thing as a purely instinctive antipathy; remaining passive until external influences rouse it; and resting on no sort of practical experience whatever?"

"I think there may be," I replied. "Why, when I was a child just able to walk, did I shrink away from the first dog I saw who barked at me? I could not have known, at that age, either by experience or teaching, that a dog's bark is sometimes the prelude to a dog's bite. My terror, on that occasion, was purely instinctive surely?"

"Ingeniously put," he said. "But I am not satisfied yet."

"You must also remember," I continued, "that she has a positively painful association with dark colors, on certain occasions. They sometimes produce a disagreeable impression on her nerves, through her sense of touch. She discovered, in that way, that I had a dark gown on, on the day when I first saw her."

"And yet, she touches my brother's face, and fails to discover any alteration in it."

I met that objection also--to my own satisfaction, though not to his.

"I am far from sure that she might not have made the discovery," I said, "if she had touched him for the first time, since the discoloration of his face. But she examines him now with a settled impression in her mind, derived from previous experience of what she has felt in touching his skin. Allow for the modifying influence of that impression on her sense of touch--and remember at the same time, that it is the color and not the texture of the skin that is changed--and his escape from discovery becomes, to my mind, intelligible."

He shook his head; he owned he could not dispute my view. But he was not

content for all that.

"Have you made any inquiries," he asked, "about the period of her infancy before she was blind? She may be still feeling, indirectly and unconsciously, the effect of some shock to her nervous system in the time when she could see."

"I have never thought of making inquiries."

"Is there anybody within our reach, who was familiarly associated with her in the first year of her life? It is hardly likely, I am afraid, at this distance of time?"

"There is a person now in the house," I said. "Her old nurse is still living."

"Send for her directly."

Zillah appeared. After first explaining what he wanted with her, Nugent went straight to the inquiry which he had in view.

"Was your young lady ever frightened when she was a baby by any dark person, or any dark thing, suddenly appearing before her?"

"Never, sir! I took good care to let nothing come near her that could frighten her--so long, poor little thing, as she could see."

"Are you quite sure you can depend on your memory?"

"Quite sure, sir--when it's a long time ago."

Zillah was dismissed. Nugent--thus far, unusually grave, and unusually anxious--turned to me with an air of relief.

"When you proposed to me to join you in forcing Oscar to speak out," he said, "I was not quite easy in my mind about the consequences. After what I have just heard, my fear is removed."

"What fear?" I asked.

"The fear of Oscar's confession producing an estrangement between them which might delay the marriage. I am against all delays. I am especially anxious that Oscar's marriage should not be put off. When we began our conversation, I own to you I was of Oscar's opinion that he would do wisely

to let marriage make him sure of his position in her affections, before he risked the disclosure. Now--after what the nurse has told us--I see no risk worth considering."

"In short," I said, "you agree with me?"

"I agree with you--though I am the most opinionated man living. The chances now seem to me to be all in Oscar's favor, Lucilla's antipathy is not what I feared it was--an antipathy firmly rooted in a constitutional malady. It is nothing more serious," said Nugent, deciding the question, at once and for ever, with the air of a man profoundly versed in physiology--"it is nothing more serious than a fanciful growth, a morbid accident, of her blindness. She may live to get over it--she would, I believe, certainly get over it, if she could see. In two words, after what I have found out this morning, I say as you say--Oscar is making a mountain out of a molehill. He ought to have put himself right with Lucilla long since. I have unbounded influence over him. It shall back your influence. Oscar shall make a clean breast of it, before the week is out."

We shook hands on that bargain. As I looked at him--bright and dashing and resolute; Oscar, as I had always wished Oscar to be--I own to my shame I privately regretted that we had not met Nugent in the twilight, on that evening of ours which had opened to Lucilla the gates of a new life.

Having said to each other all that we had to say--our two lovers being away together at the time, for a walk on the hills--we separated, as I then supposed, for the rest of the day. Nugent went to the inn, to look at a stable which he proposed converting into a studio: no room at Browndown being half large enough, for the first prodigious picture with which the "Grand Consoler" in Art proposed to astonish the world. As for me, having nothing particular to do, I went out to see if I could meet Oscar and Lucilla on their return from their walk.

Failing to find them, I strolled back by way of Browndown. Nugent was sitting alone on the low wall in front of the house, smoking a cigar. He rose and came to meet me, with his finger placed mysteriously on his lips.

"You mustn't come in," he said; "you mustn't speak loud enough to be heard." He pointed round the corner of the house to the little room at the side, already familiar to you in these pages. "Oscar and Lucilla are shut up together there. And Oscar is making his confession to her at this moment!"

I lifted my hands and eyes in astonishment. Nugent went on.

"I see you want to know how it has all come about. You shall know.--While I was looking at the stable (it isn't half big enough for a studio for Me!), Oscar's servant brought me a little pencil note, entreating me, in Oscar's name, to go to him directly at Browndown. I found him waiting out here, dreadfully agitated. He cautioned me (just as I have cautioned you) not to speak loud. For the same reason too. Lucilla was in the house----"

"I thought they had gone out for a walk," I interposed.

"They did go out for a walk. But Lucilla complained of fatigue; and Oscar brought her back to Browndown to rest. Well! I inquired what was the matter. The answer informed me that the secret of Oscar's complexion had forced its way out for the second time, in Lucilla's hearing."

"Jicks again!" I exclaimed.

"No--not Jicks. Oscar's own man-servant, this time."

"How did it happen?"

"It happened through one of the boys in the village. Oscar and Lucilla found the little imp howling outside the house. They asked what was the matter. The imp told them that the servant at Browndown had beaten him. Lucilla was indignant. She insisted on having the thing inquired into. Oscar left her in the drawing-room (unluckily, as it turned out, without shutting the door); called the man up into the passage, and asked what he meant by ill-using the boy. The man answered, 'I boxed his ears, sir, as an example to the rest of them.' 'What did he do?' 'Rapped at the door, sir, with a stick (he is not the first who has done it when you are out); and asked if Blue Face was at home.' Lucilla heard every word of it, through the open door. Need I tell you what happened next?"

It was quite needless to relate that part of the story. I remembered too well what had happened on the former occasion, in the garden. I saw too plainly that Lucilla must have connected the two occurrences in her mind, and must have had her ready suspicion roused to serious action, as the necessary result.

"I understand," I said. "Of course, she insisted on an explanation. Of course, Oscar compromised himself by a clumsy excuse, and wanted you to help him. What did you do?"

"What I told you I should do this morning. He had counted confidently on my taking his side--it was pitiable to see him, poor fellow! Still, for his own sake, I refused to yield. I left him the choice of giving her the true explanation himself, or of leaving me to do it. There wasn't a moment to lose; she was in no humour to be trifled with, I can tell you! Oscar behaved very well about it--he always behaves well when I drive him into a corner! In one word, he was man enough to feel that he was the right person to make a clean breast of it--not I. I gave the poor old boy a hug to encourage him, pushed him into the room, shut the door on him, and came out here. He ought to have done it by this time. He has done it! Here he comes!"

Oscar ran out, bareheaded, from the house. There were signs of disturbance in him, as he approached us, which warned me that something had gone wrong, before he opened his lips.

Nugent spoke first.

"What's amiss now?" he asked. "Have you told her the truth?"

"I have tried to tell her the truth."

"Tried? What do you mean?"

Oscar put his arm round his brother's neck, and laid his head on his brother's shoulder, without answering one word.

I put a question to him on my side.

"Did Lucilla refuse to listen to you?" I asked.

"No."

"Has she said anything or done anything----?"

He lifted his head from his brother's shoulder, and stopped me before I could finish the sentence.

"You need feel no anxiety about Lucilla. Lucilla's curiosity is satisfied."

Nugent and I gazed at one another, in complete bewilderment. Lucilla had heard it all; Lucilla's curiosity was satisfied. He had that incredibly happy result to communicate to us--and he announced it with a look of humiliation, in a tone of despair! Nugent's patience gave way.

"Let us have an end of this mystification," he said, putting Oscar back from him, sharply, at arm's length. "I want a plain answer to a plain question. She knows that the boy knocked at the door, and asked if Blue Face was at home. Does she know what the boy's impudence meant? Yes? or No?"

"Yes."

"Does she know that it is you who are Blue Face?"

"No."

"No!!! Who else does she think it is?"

As he asked the question, Lucilla appeared at the door of the house. She moved her blind face inquiringly first one way, then the other. "Oscar!" she called out, "why have you left me alone? where are you?"

Oscar turned, trembling, to his brother.

"For God's sake forgive me, Nugent!" he said. "She thinks it's YOU."