

## CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

He finds a Way out of it

WE sat down at the piano, as Lucilla had proposed. She wished me to play first, and to play alone. I was teaching her, at the time, one of the Sonatas of Mozart; and I now tried to go on with the lesson. Never before, or since, have I played so badly, as on that day! The divine serenity and completeness by which Mozart's music is, to my mind, raised above all other music that ever was written, can only be worthily interpreted by a player whose whole mind is given undividedly to the work. Devoured as I then was by my own anxieties, I might profane those heavenly melodies--I could not play them. Lucilla accepted my excuses, and took my place.

Half an hour passed, without news from Browndown.

Calculated by reference to itself, half an hour is no doubt a short space of time. Calculated by reference to your own suspense, while your own interests are at stake, half an hour is an eternity. Every minute that passed, leaving Lucilla still undisturbed in her delusion, was a minute that pricked me in the conscience. The longer we left her in ignorance, the more painful to all of us the hard duty of enlightening her would become. I began to get restless. Lucilla, on her side, began to complain of fatigue. After the agitation that she had gone through, the inevitable reaction had come. I recommended her to go to her room and rest. She took my advice. In the state of my mind at that time, it was an inexpressible relief to me to be left by myself.

After pacing backwards and forwards for some little time in the sitting-room, and trying vainly to see my way through the difficulties that now beset us, I made up my mind to wait no longer for the news that never came. The brothers were still at Browndown. To Browndown I determined to return.

I peeped quietly into Lucilla's room. She was asleep. After a word to Zillah, recommending her young mistress to her care, I slipped out. As I crossed the lawn, I heard the garden-gate opened. In a minute more, the man of all others whom I most wanted to see, presented himself before me, in the person of Nugent Dubourg. He had borrowed Oscar's key, and had set off alone for the rectory to tell me what had passed between his brother and himself.

"This is the first stroke of luck that has fallen to me to-day," he said. "I was wondering how I should contrive to speak to you privately. And here you are--accessible and alone. Where is Lucilla? Can we depend on having the garden to ourselves?"

I satisfied him on both those points. He looked sadly pale and worn. Before he opened his lips, I saw that he too had had his mind disturbed, and his patience tried, since I had left him. There was a summer-house at the end of the garden with a view over the breezy solitude of the Downs. Here we established ourselves; and here, in my headlong way, I opened the interview with the one formidable question:--"Who is to tell her of the mistake she has made?"

"Nobody is to tell her."

That answer staggered me at the outset. I looked at Nugent in silent astonishment.

"There is nothing to be surprised at," he said. "Let me put my point of view before you in two words. I have had a serious talk with Oscar--"

Women are proverbially bad listeners--and I am no better than the rest of them. I interrupted him, before he could get any farther.

"I suppose Oscar has told you how the mistake happened?" I said.

"He has no idea how it happened. He owns--when he found himself face to face with her--that his presence of mind completely failed him: he didn't himself know what he was saying at the time. He lost his head; and she lost her patience. Think of his nervous confusion in collision with her nervous irritability--and the result explains itself: nothing could come of it but misapprehension and mistake. I turned the thing over in my mind, after you had left us; and the one course to take that I could see was to accept the position patiently, and to make the best instead of the worst of it. Having reached this conclusion, I settled the matter (as I settle most other difficulties)--by cutting the Gordian knot. I said to Oscar, 'Would it be a relief to your mind to leave her present impression undisturbed until you are married?' You know him--I needn't tell you what his answer was. 'Very well,' I said. 'Dry your eyes and compose yourself. I have begun as Blue Face. As Blue Face I will go on till further notice.' I spare you the description of Oscar's gratitude. I proposed; and he accepted. There is the way out of the difficulty as I see it."

"Your way out of the difficulty is an unworthy way, and a false way," I answered. "I protest against taking that cruel advantage of Lucilla's blindness. I refuse to have anything to do with it."

He opened his case, and took out a cigar.

"Do as you please," he said. "You saw the pitiable state she was in, when she forced herself to speak to me. You saw how her disgust and horror overpowered her at the end. Transfer that disgust and horror to Oscar (with indignation and contempt added in his case); expose him to the result of rousing those feelings in her, before he is fortified by a husband's influence over her mind, and a husband's place in her affections--if you dare. I love the poor fellow; and I daren't. May I smoke?"

I gave him his permission to smoke by a gesture. Before I said anything more to this inscrutable gentleman, I felt the necessity of understanding him--if I could.

There was no difficulty in accounting for his readiness to sacrifice himself in the interests of Oscar's tranquillity. He never did things by halves--he liked dashing at difficulties which would have made other men pause. The same zeal in his brother's service which had saved Oscar's life at the Trial, might well be the zeal that animated him now. The perplexity that I felt was not roused in me by the course that he had taken--but by the language in which he justified himself, and, more still, by his behavior to me while he was speaking. The well-bred brilliant young fellow of my previous experience, had now turned as dogged and as ungracious as a man could be. He waited to hear what I had to say to him next, with a hard defiance and desperation of manner entirely uncalled for by the circumstances, and entirely out of harmony with his character, so far as I had observed it. That there was something lurking under the surface, some inner motive at work in him which he was concealing from his brother and concealing from me, was as plainly visible as the sunshine and shade on the view that I was looking at from the summer-house. But what that something was, or what that inner motive might be, it baffled my utmost sagacity to guess. Not the faintest idea of the terrible secret that he was hiding from me, crossed my mind. Innocent of all suspicion of the truth, there I sat opposite to him, the unconscious witness of that unhappy man's final struggle to be true to the brother whom he loved, and to master the devouring passion that consumed him. So long as Lucilla falsely believed him to be disfigured by the drug, so long the commonest consideration for her tranquillity would, in the estimation of others, excuse and explain his keeping out of her presence. In that separation, lay his last chance of raising an insurmountable barrier between

Lucilla and himself. He had already tried uselessly to place another obstacle in the way--he had vainly attempted to hasten the marriage which would have made Lucilla sacred to him as his brother's wife. That effort having failed, there was but one honorable alternative left to him--to keep out of her society, until she was married to Oscar. He had accepted the position in which Oscar had placed him, as the one means of reaching the end in view without exciting suspicion of the truth--and he had encountered, as his reward for the sacrifice, my ignorant protest, my stupid opposition, set as obstacles in his way! There were the motives--the pure, the noble motives--which animated him, as I know them now. There is the right reading of the dogged language that mystified me, of the defiant manner that offended me; interpreted by the one light that I have to guide my pen--the light of later events!

"Well?" he said. "Are we allies, or not? Are you with me or against me?"

I gave up attempting to understand him; and answered that plain question, plainly.

"I don't deny that the consequences of undeceiving her may be serious," I said. "But, for all that, I will have no share in the cruelty of keeping her deceived."

Nugent held up his forefinger, warningly.

"Pause, and reflect, Madame Pratolungo! The mischief that you may do, as matters stand now, may be mischief that you can never repair. It's useless to ask you to alter your mind. I only ask you to wait a little. There is plenty of time before the wedding-day. Something may happen which will spare you the necessity of enlightening Lucilla with your own lips."

"What can happen?" I asked.

"Lucilla may yet see him, as we see him," Nugent answered. "Lucilla's own eyes may discover the truth."

"What! have you not abandoned the mad notion of curing her blindness, yet?"

"I will abandon my notion when the German surgeon tells me it is mad. Not before."

"Have you said anything about it to Oscar?"

"Not a word. I shall say nothing about it to anybody but you, until the German is safe on the shores of England."

"Do you expect him to arrive before the marriage?"

"Certainly! He would have left New York with me, but for one patient who still required his care. No new patients will tempt him to stay in America. His extraordinary success has made his fortune. The ambition of his life is to see England: and he can afford to gratify it. He may be here by the next steamer that reaches Liverpool."

"And when he does come, you mean to bring him to Dimchurch?"

"Yes--unless Lucilla objects to it."

"Suppose Oscar objects? She is resigned to be blind for life. If you disturb that resignation with no useful result, you may make an unhappy woman of her for the rest of her days. In your brother's place, I should object to running that risk."

"My brother is doubly interested in running the risk. I repeat what I have already told you. The physical result will not be the only result, if her sight can be restored. There will be a new mind put into her as well as a new sense. Oscar has everything to dread from this morbid fancy of hers as long as she is blind. Only let her eyes correct her fancy--only let her see him as we see him, and get used to him, as we have got used to him; and Oscar's future with her is safe. Will you leave things as they are for the present, on the chance that the German surgeon may get here before the wedding-day?"

I consented to that; being influenced, in spite of myself, by the remarkable coincidence between what Nugent had just said of Lucilla, and what Lucilla had said to me of herself earlier in the day. It was impossible to deny that Nugent's theory, wild as it sounded, found its confirmation, so far, in Lucilla's view of her own case. Having settled the difference between us in this way, for the time being, I shifted our talk next to the difficult question of Nugent's relations towards Lucilla. "How are you to meet her again," I said, "after the effect you produced on her at the meeting to-day?"

He spoke far more pleasantly in discussing this side of the subject. His language and his manner both improved together.

"If I could have had my own way," he said, "Lucilla would have been relieved,

by this time, of all fear of meeting with me again. She would have heard from you, or from Oscar, that business had obliged me to leave Dimchurch."

"Does Oscar object to let you go?"

"He won't hear of my going. I did my best to persuade him--I promised to return for the marriage. Quite useless! 'If you leave me here by myself,' he said, 'to think over the mischief I have done, and the sacrifices I have forced on you--you will break my heart. You don't know what an encouragement your presence is to me; you don't know what a blank you will leave in my life if you go!' I am as weak as Oscar is, when Oscar speaks to me in that way. Against my own convictions, against my own wishes, I yielded. I should have been better away--far, far better away!"

He said those closing words in a tone that startled me. It was nothing less than a tone of despair. How little I understood him then! how well I understand him now! In those melancholy accents, spoke the last of his honor, the last of his truth. Miserable, innocent Lucia! Miserable, guilty Nugent!

"And now you remain at Dimchurch," I resumed, "what are you to do?"

"I must do my best to spare her the nervous suffering which I unwillingly inflicted on her to-day. The morbid repulsion that she feels in my presence is not to be controlled--I can see that plainly. I shall keep out of her way; gradually withdrawing myself, so as not to force my absence on her attention. I shall pay fewer and fewer visits at the rectory, and remain longer and longer at Browndown every day. After they are married----" He suddenly stopped; the words seemed to stick in his throat. He busied himself in relighting his cigar, and took a long time to do it.

"After they are married," I repeated. "What then?"

"When Oscar is married, Oscar will not find my presence indispensable to his happiness. I shall leave Dimchurch."

"You will have to give a reason."

"I shall give the true reason. I can find no studio here big enough for me--as I have told you. And, even if I could find a studio, I should be doing no good, if I remained at Dimchurch. My intellect would contract, my brains would rust, in this remote place. Let Oscar live his quiet married life here. And let me go to the atmosphere that is fitter for me--the atmosphere of London or

Paris."

He sighed, and fixed his eyes absently on the open hilly view from the summer-house door.

"It's strange to see you depressed," I said. "Your spirits seemed to be quite inexhaustible on that first evening when you interrupted Mr. Finch over Hamlet."

He threw away the end of his cigar, and laughed bitterly.

"We artists are always in extremes," he said. "What do you think I was wishing just before you spoke to me?"

"I can't guess."

"I was wishing I had never come to Dimchurch!"

Before I could return a word, on my side, Lucilla's voice reached our ears, calling to me from the garden. Nugent instantly sprang to his feet.

"Have we said all we need say?" he asked.

"Yes--for to-day, at any rate."

"For to-day, then--good-bye."

He leapt up; caught the cross-bar of wood over the entrance to the summer-house; and, swinging himself on to the low garden-wall beyond, disappeared in the field on the other side. I answered Lucilla's call, and hastened away to find her. We met on the lawn. She looked wild and pale, as if something had frightened her.

"Anything wrong at the rectory?" I asked.

"Nothing wrong," she answered--"except with Me. The next time I complain of fatigue, don't advise me to go and lie down on my bed."

"Why not? I looked in at you, before I came out here. You were fast asleep--the picture of repose."

"Repose? You never were more mistaken in your life. I was in the agony of a horrid dream."

"You were perfectly quiet when I saw you."

"It must have been after you saw me, then. Let me come and sleep with you to-night. I daren't be by myself, if I dream of it again."

"What did you dream of?"

"I dreamt that I was standing, in my wedding dress, before the altar of a strange church; and that a clergyman whose voice I had never heard before, was marrying me----" She stopped, impatiently waving her hand before her in the air. "Blind as I am," she said, "I see him again now!"

"The bridegroom?"

"Yes."

"Oscar?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"Oscar's brother. Nugent Dubourg."

(Have I mentioned before, that I am sometimes a great fool? If I have not, I beg to mention it now. I burst out laughing.)

"What is there to laugh at?" she asked angrily. "I saw his hideous, discolored face--I am never blind in my dreams! I felt his blue hand put the ring on my finger. Wait! The worst part of it is to come. I married Nugent Dubourg willingly--married him without a thought of my engagement to Oscar. Yes! yes! I know it's only a dream. I can't bear to think of it, for all that. I don't like to be false to Oscar even in a dream. Let us go to him. I want to hear him tell me that he loves me. Come to Browndown. I'm so nervous, I don't like going by myself. Come to Browndown!"

I have another humiliating confession to make--I tried to get off going to Browndown. (So like those unfeeling French people, isn't it?)

But I had my reason too. If I disapproved of the resolution at which Nugent had arrived, I viewed far more unfavorably the selfish weakness on Oscar's part, which had allowed his brother to sacrifice himself. Lucilla's lover had



sunk to something very like a despicable character in my estimation. I felt that I might let him see what I thought of him, if I found myself in his company at that moment.

"Considering the object that you have in view, my dear," I said to Lucilla, "do you think you want me at Browndown?"

"Haven't I already told you?" she asked impatiently. "I am so nervous--so completely upset--that I don't feel equal to going out by myself. Have you no sympathy for me? Suppose you had dreamed that you were marrying Nugent instead of Oscar?"

"Ah, bah! what of that? I should only have dreamed that I was marrying the most agreeable man of the two."

"The most agreeable man of the two! There you are again--always unjust to Oscar."

"My love! if you could see for yourself, you would learn to appreciate Nugent's good qualities, as I do."

"I prefer appreciating Oscar's good qualities."

"You are prejudiced, Lucilla."

"So are you!"

"You happen to have met Oscar first."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Yes! yes! If Nugent had followed us, instead of Oscar; if, of those two charming voices which are both the same, one had spoken instead of the other--"

"I won't hear a word more!"

"Tra-la-la-la! It happens to have been Oscar. Turn it the other way--and Nugent might have been the man.

"Madame Pratolungo, I am not accustomed to be insulted! I have no more to say to you."

With that dignified reply, and with the loveliest color in her face that you ever saw in your life, my darling Lucilla turned her pretty back on me, and set off for Browndown by herself.

Ah, my rash tongue! Ah, my nasty foreign temper! Why did I let her irritate me? I, the elder of the two--why did I not set her an example of self-control? Who can tell? When does a woman know why she does anything? Did Eve know--when Mr. Serpent offered her the apple--why she ate it? not she!

What was to be done now? Two things were to be done. First thing:--To cool myself down. Second thing:--To follow Lucilla, and kiss and make it up.

Either I took some time to cool--or, in the irritation of the moment, Lucilla walked faster than usual. She had got to Browndown before I could overtake her. On opening the house-door, I heard them talking. It would hardly do to disturb them--especially now I was in disgrace. While I was hesitating, and wondering what my next proceeding had better be, my eye was attracted by a letter lying on the hall-table. I looked (one is always inquisitive in those idle moments when one doesn't know what to do)--I looked at the address. The letter was directed to Nugent; and the post-mark was Liverpool.

I drew the inevitable conclusion. The German oculist was in England!