

## CHAPTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH

He crosses the Rubicon

I WAS still in doubt, whether to enter the room, or to wait outside until she left Browndown to return to the rectory--when Lucilla's keen sense of hearing decided the question which I had been unable to settle for myself. The door of the room opened; and Oscar advanced into the hall.

"Lucilla insisted that she heard somebody outside," he said. "Who could have guessed it was you? Why did you wait in the hall? Come in! come in!"

He held open the door for me; and I went in. Oscar announced me to Lucilla. "It was Madame Pratolungo you heard," he said. She took no notice either of him or of me. A heap of flowers from Oscar's garden lay in her lap. With the help of her clever fingers, she was sorting them to make a nosegay, as quickly and as tastefully as if she had possessed the sense of sight. In all my experience of that charming face, it had never looked so hard as it looked now. Nobody would have recognized her likeness to the Madonna of Raphael's picture. Offended--mortally offended with me--I saw it at a glance.

"I hope you will forgive my intrusion, Lucilla, when you know my motive," I said. "I have followed you here to make my excuses."

"Oh, don't think of making excuses!" she rejoined, giving three-fourths of her attention to the flowers, and one-fourth to me. "It's a pity you took the trouble of coming here. I quite agree with what you said in the garden. Considering the object I had in view at Browndown, I could not possibly expect you to accompany me. True! quite true!"

I kept my temper. Not that I am a patient woman: not that I possess a meek disposition. Very far from it, I regret to say. Nevertheless, I kept my temper--so far.

"I wish to apologize for what I said in the garden," I resumed. "I spoke thoughtlessly, Lucilla. It is impossible that I could intentionally offend you."

I might as well have spoken to one of the chairs. The whole of her attention became absorbed in the breathless interest of making her nosegay.

"Was I offended?" she said, addressing herself to the flowers. "Excessively

foolish of me, if I was." She suddenly became conscious of my existence. "You had a perfect right to express your opinion," she said loftily. "Accept my excuses if I appeared to dispute it."

She tossed her pretty head; she showed her brightest color; she tapped her nice little foot briskly on the floor. (Oh, Lucilla! Lucilla!) I still kept my temper. More, by this time (I admit,) for Oscar's sake than for her sake. He looked so distressed, poor fellow--so painfully anxious to interfere, without exactly knowing how.

"My dear Lucilla!" he began. "Surely you might answer Madame Pratolungo--"

She petulantly interrupted him, with another toss of the head--a little higher than the last.

"I don't attempt to answer Madame Pratolungo! I prefer admitting that Madame Pratolungo may have been quite right. I dare say I am ready to fall in love with the first man who comes my way. I dare say--if I had met your brother before I met you--I should have fallen in love with him. Quite likely!"

"Quite likely--as you say,"--answered poor Oscar, humbly. "I am sure I think it very lucky for me, that you didn't meet Nugent first."

She threw her lapful of flowers away from her on the table at which she was sitting. She became perfectly furious with him for taking my side. I permitted myself (the poor child could not see it, remember), the harmless indulgence of a smile.

"You agree with Madame Pratolungo," she said to him viciously. "Madame Pratolungo thinks your brother a much more agreeable man than you."

Humble Oscar shook his head in melancholy acknowledgment of this self-evident fact. "There can be no two opinions about that," he said resignedly.

She stamped her foot on the carpet--and raised quite a little cloud of dust. My lungs are occasionally delicate. I permitted myself another harmless indulgence--indulgence in a slight cough. She heard the second indulgence--and suddenly controlled herself, the instant it reached her ears. I am afraid she took my cough as my commentary on what was going on.

"Come here, Oscar," she said, with a complete change of tone and manner. "Come and sit down by me."

Oscar obeyed.

"Put your arm round my waist."

Oscar looked at me. Having the use of his sight, he was sensible of the absurd side of the demonstration required of him--in the presence of a third person. She, poor soul, strong in her blind insensibility to all shafts of ridicule shot from the eye, cared nothing for the presence of a third person. She repeated her commands, in a tone which said sharply, "Embrace me--I am not to be trifled with."

Oscar timidly put his arm round her waist--with an appealing look at me. She issued another command instantly.

"Say you love me."

Oscar hesitated.

"Say you love me!"

Oscar whispered it.

"Out loud!"

Endurance has its limits: I began to lose my temper. She could not have been more superbly indifferent to my presence, if there had been a cat in the room instead of a lady.

"Permit me to inform you," I said, "that I have not (as you appear to suppose) left the room."

She took no notice. She went on with her commands, rising irrepressibly from one amatory climax to another.

"Give me a kiss!"

Unhappy Oscar--sacrificed between us--blushed. Stop! Don't revel prematurely in the greatest enjoyment a reader has--namely, catching a writer out in a mistake. I have not forgotten that his disfigured complexion would prevent his blush from showing on the surface. I beg to say I saw it under the surface--saw it in his expression: I repeat--he blushed.

I felt it necessary to assert myself for the second time.

"I have only one object in remaining in the room, Miss Finch. I merely wish to know whether you refuse to accept my excuses.

"Oscar! give me a kiss!"

He still hesitated. She threw her arm round his neck. My duty to myself was plain--my duty was to go.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dubourg," I said--and turned to the door. She heard me cross the room, and called to me to stop. I paused. There was a glass on the wall opposite to me. On the authority of the glass, I beg to mention that I paused in my most becoming manner. Grace tempered with dignity: dignity tempered with grace.

"Madame Pratolungo!"

"Miss Finch?"

"This is the man who is not half so agreeable as his brother. Look!"

She tightened her hold round his neck, and gave him--ostentatiously gave him--the kiss which he was ashamed to give her. I advanced, in contemptuous silence, to the door. My attitude expressed disgust accompanied by sorrow: sorrow, accompanied by disgust.

"Madame Pratolungo!"

I made no answer.

"This is the man whom I should never have loved if I had happened to meet his brother first. Look!"

She put both arms round his neck; and gave him a shower of kisses all in one. I indignantly withdrew. The door had been imperfectly closed when I had entered the room: it was ajar. I pulled it open--and found myself face to face with Nugent Dubourg, standing by the table, with his letter from Liverpool in his hand! He must have certainly heard Lucilla cast my own words back in my teeth--if he had heard no more.

I stopped short; looking at him in silent surprise. He smiled, and held out the open letter to me. Before we could speak, we heard the door of the room

closed. Oscar had followed me out (shutting the door behind him) to apologize for Lucilla's behavior to me. He explained what had happened to his brother. Nugent nodded, and tapped his open letter smartly. "Leave me to manage it. I shall give you something better to do than quarreling among yourselves. You will hear what it is directly. In the meantime, I have got a message for our friend at the inn. Gootheridge is on his way here, to speak to me about altering the stable. Run and tell him I have other business on hand, and I can't keep my appointment to-day. Stop! Give him this at the same time, and ask him to leave it at the rectory."

He took one of his visiting cards out of the case, wrote a few lines on it in pencil, and handed it to his brother. Oscar (always ready to go on errands for Nugent) hurried out to meet the landlord. Nugent turned to me.

"The German is in England," he said. "Now I may open my lips."

"At once!" I exclaimed.

"At once. I have put off my own business (as you heard) in favor of this. My friend will be in London to-morrow. I mean to get my authority to consult him to-day, and to start tomorrow for town. Prepare yourself to meet one of the strangest characters you ever set eyes on! You saw me write on my card. It was a message to Mr. Finch, asking him to join us immediately (on important family business) at Browndown. As Lucilla's father, he has a voice in the matter. When Oscar comes back, and when the rector joins us, our domestic privy council will be complete."

He spoke with his customary spirit; he moved with his customary briskness--he had become quite himself again, since I had seen him last.

"I am stagnating in this place," he went on, seeing that I noticed the change in him. "It puts me in spirits again, having something to do. I am not like Oscar--I must have action to stir my blood--action to keep me from fretting over my anxieties. How do you think I found the witness to my brother's innocence at the Trial? In that way. I said to myself, 'I shall go mad if I don't do something.' I did something--and saved Oscar. I am going to do something again. Mark my words! Now I am stirring in it, Lucilla will recover her sight."

"This is a serious matter," I said. "Pray give it serious consideration."

"Consideration?" he repeated. "I hate the word. I always decide on the instant. If I am wrong in my view of Lucilla's case, consideration is of no

earthly use. If I am right, every day's delay is a day of sight lost to the blind. I'll wait for Oscar and Mr. Finch; and then I'll open the business. Why are we talking in the hall? Come in!"

He led the way to the sitting-room. I had a new interest, now, in going back. Still, Lucilla's behavior hung on my mind. Suppose she treated me with renewed coldness and keener contempt? I remained standing at the table in the hall. Nugent looked back at me, over his shoulder.

"Nonsense!" he said. "I'll set things right. It's beneath a woman like you to take notice of what a girl says in a pet. Come in!"

I doubt if I should have yielded to please any other living man. But, there is no denying it, some people have a magnetic attracting power over others. Nugent had that power over me. Against my own will--for I was really hurt and offended by her usage of me--I went back with him into the room.

Lucilla was still sitting in the place which she had occupied when I withdrew. On hearing the door open, and a man's footsteps entering, she of course assumed that the man was Oscar. She had penetrated his object in leaving her to follow me out, and it had not improved her temper.

"Oh?" she said. "You have come back at last? I thought you had offered yourself as Madame Pratolungo's escort to the rectory." She stopped, with a sudden frown. Her quick ears had detected my return into the room.

"Oscar!" she exclaimed, "what does this mean? Madame Pratolungo and I have nothing more to say to each other. What has she come back for? Why don't you answer? This is infamous! I shall leave the room!"

The utterance of that final threat was followed so rapidly by its execution that, before Nugent (standing between her and the door) could get out of her way, she came in violent contact with him. She instantly caught him by the arm, and shook him angrily. "What does your silence mean? Is it at Madame Pratolungo's instigation that you are insulting me?"

I had just opened my lips to make one more attempt at reconciliation, by saying some pacifying words to her--when she planted that last sting in me. French flesh and blood (whatever English flesh and blood might have done) could bear no more. I silently turned my back on her, in a rage.

At the same moment, Nugent's eyes brightened as if a new idea had struck him. He gave me one significant look--and answered her in his brother's character. Whether he was possessed at the moment by some demon of

mischievous; or whether he had the idea of trying to make Oscar's peace for him, before Oscar returned--was more than I could say at the time. I ought to have stopped it--I know. But my temper was in a flame. I was as spiteful as a cat and as fierce as a bear. I said to myself (in your English idiom), She wants taking down a peg; quite right, Mr. Nugent; do it. Shocking! shameful! no words are bad enough for me: give it me well. Ah, Heaven! what is a human being in a rage? On my sacred word of honor, nothing but a human beast! The next time it happens to You, look at yourself in the glass; and you will find your soul gone out of you at your face, and nothing left but an animal--and a bad, a villainous bad animal too!

"You ask what my silence means?" said Nugent.

He had only to model his articulation on his brother's slower manner of speaking as distinguished from his own, to be his brother himself. In saying those few first words, he did it so dexterously that I could have sworn--if I had not seen him standing before me--Oscar was in the room.

"Yes," she said, "I ask that."

"I am silent," he answered, "because I am waiting."

"What are you waiting for?"

"To hear you make your apologies to Madame Pratolungo."

She started back a step. Submissive Oscar was taking a peremptory tone with her for the first time in his life. Submissive Oscar, instead of giving her time to speak, sternly went on.

"Madame Pratolungo has made her excuses to you. You ought to receive them; you ought to reciprocate them. It is distressing to see you and hear you. You are behaving ungratefully to your best friend."

She raised her face, she raised her hands, in blank amazement: she looked as if she distrusted her own ears.

"Oscar!" she exclaimed.

"Here I am," said Oscar, opening the door at the same moment.

She turned like lightning towards the place from which he had spoken. She detected the deception which Nugent had practiced on her, with a cry of

indignation that rang through the room.

Oscar ran to her in alarm. She thrust him back violently.

"A trick!" she cried. "A mean, vile, cowardly trick played upon my blindness! Oscar! your brother has been imitating you; your brother has been speaking to me in your voice. And that woman who calls herself my friend--that woman stood by and heard him, and never told me. She encouraged it: she enjoyed it. The wretches! take me away from them. They are capable of any deceit. She always hated you, dear, from the first--she took up with your brother the moment he came here. When you marry me, it mustn't be at Dimchurch; it must be in some place they don't know of. There is a conspiracy between them against you and against me. Beware of them! beware of them! She said I should have fallen in love with your brother, if I had met him first. There is a deeper meaning in that, my love, than you can see. It means that they will part us if they can. Ha! I hear somebody moving! Has he changed places with you? Is it you whom I am speaking to now? Oh, my blindness! my blindness! Oh, God, of all your creatures, the most helpless, the most miserable, is the creature who can't see!"

I never heard anything in all my life so pitiable and so dreadful as the frantic suspicion and misery which tore their way out from her, in those words. She cut me to the heart. I had spoken rashly--I had behaved badly--but had I deserved this? No! no! no! I had not deserved it. I threw myself into a chair, and burst out crying. My tears scalded me; my sobs choked me. If I had had poison in my hand, I would have drunk it--I was so furious and so wretched: so hurt in my honor, so wounded at my heart.

The only voice that answered her was Nugent's. Reckless what the consequences might be--speaking, in his own proper person, from the opposite end of the room--he asked the all-important question which no human being had ever put to her yet.

"Are you sure, Lucilla, that you are blind for life?"

A dead silence followed the utterance of those words.

I brushed away the tears from my eyes, and looked up.

Oscar had been--as I supposed--holding her in his arms, silently soothing her, when his brother spoke. At the moment when I saw her, she had just detached herself from him. She advanced a step, towards the part of the room in which Nugent stood--and stopped, with her face turned towards



him. Every faculty in her seemed to be suspended by the silent passage into her mind of the new idea that he had called up. Through childhood, girlhood, womanhood--never once, waking or dreaming, had the prospect of restoration to sight presented itself within her range of contemplation, until now. Not a trace was left in her countenance of the indignation which Nugent had roused in her, hardly more than a moment since. Not a sign appeared indicating a return of the nervous suffering which the sense of his presence had inflicted on her, earlier in the day. The one emotion in possession of her was astonishment--astonishment that had struck her dumb; astonishment that waited, helplessly and mechanically, to hear more.

I observed Oscar, next. His eyes were fixed on Lucilla--absorbed in watching her. He spoke to Nugent, without looking at him; animated, as it seemed, by a vague fear for Lucilla, which was slowly developing into a vague fear for himself.

"Mind what you are doing!" he said. "Look at her, Nugent--look at her."

Nugent approached his brother, circuitously, so as to place Oscar between Lucilla and himself.

"Have I offended you?" he asked.

Oscar looked at him in surprise. "Offended with you," he answered, "after what you have forgiven, and what you have suffered, for my sake?"

"Still," persisted the other, "there is something wrong."

"I am startled, Nugent."

"Startled--by what?"

"By the question you have just put to Lucilla."

"You will understand me, and she will understand me, directly."

While those words were passing between the brothers, my attention remained fixed on Lucilla. Her head had turned slowly towards the new position which Nugent occupied when he spoke to Oscar. With this exception, no other movement had escaped her. No sense of what the two men were saying to each other seemed to have entered her mind. To all appearance she had heard nothing, since Nugent had started the first doubt in her whether she was blind for life.

"Speak to her," I said. "For God's sake, don't keep her in suspense, now!"

Nugent spoke.

"You have had reason to be offended with me, Lucilla. Let me, if I can, give you reason to be grateful to me, before I have done. When I was in New York, I became acquainted with a German surgeon, who had made a reputation and a fortune in America by his skill in treating diseases of the eye. He had been especially successful in curing cases of blindness given up as hopeless by other surgeons. I mentioned your case to him. He could say nothing positively (as a matter of course) without examining you. All he could do was to place his services at my disposal, when he came to England. I for one, Lucilla, decline to consider you blind for life, until this skillful man sees no more hope for you than the English surgeons have seen. If there is the faintest chance still left of restoring your sight, his is, I firmly believe, the one hand that can do it. He is now in England. Say the word--and I will bring him to Dimchurch."

She slowly lifted her hands to her head, and held it as if she was holding her reason in its place. Her color changed from pale to red--from red to pale once more. She drew a long, deep, heavy breath--and dropped her hands again, recovering from the shock. The change that followed, held us all three breathless. It was beautiful to see her. It was awful to see her. A mute ecstasy of hope transfigured her face; a heavenly smile played serenely on her lips. She was among us, and yet apart from us. In the still light of evening, shining in on her from the window, she stood absorbed in her own rapture--the silent creature of another sphere! There was a moment when she overcame me with admiration, and another moment when she overcame me with fear. Both the men felt it. Both signed to me to speak to her first.

I advanced a few steps. I tried to consider with myself what I should say. It was useless. I could neither think nor speak. I could only look at her. I could only say, nervously--

"Lucilla!"

She came back to the world--she came back to us--with a little start, and a faint flush of color in her cheeks. She turned herself towards the place from which I had spoken, and whispered---

"Come!"

In a moment, my arms were round her. Her head sank on my bosom. We were reconciled without a word. We were friends again, sisters again, in an instant.

"Have I been fainting? have I been sleeping?" she said to me in low, bewildered tones. "Am I just awake? Is this Browndown?" She suddenly lifted her head. "Nugent! are you there?"

"Yes."

She gently withdrew herself from me, and approached Nugent.

"Did you speak to me just now? Was it you who put the doubt into my mind, whether I am really doomed to be blind for life? Surely, I have not fancied it? Surely, you said the man was coming, and the time coming?" Her voice suddenly rose. "The man who may cure me! the time when I may see!"

"I said it, Lucilla. I meant it, Lucilla."

"Oscar! Oscar!! Oscar!!!"

I stepped forward to lead her to him. Nugent touched me, and pointed to Oscar, as I took her hand. He was standing before the glass--with an expression of despair which I see again while I write these lines--he was standing close to the glass; looking in silence at the hideous reflection of his face. In sheer pity, I hesitated to take her to him. She stepped forward, and, stretching out her hand, touched his shoulder. The reflection of her charming face appeared behind his face in the glass. She raised herself on tiptoe, with both hands on him, and said, "The time is coming, my darling, when I may see You!"

With a cry of joy, she drew his face to her, and kissed him on the forehead. His head fell on his breast when she released it: he covered his face with his hands, and stifled, for the moment, all outward expression of the pang that wrung him. I drew her rapidly away, before her quick sensibilities had time to warn her that something was wrong. Even as it was, she resisted me. Even as it was, she asked suspiciously, "Why do you take me away from him?"

What excuse could I make? I was at my wits' end.

She repeated the question. For once Fortune favored us. A timely knock at the door stopped her just as she was trying to release herself from me.

"Somebody coming in," I said. The servant entered, as I spoke, with a letter from the rectory.