

CHAPTER THE THIRTIETH

Herr Grosse

SEVERAL circumstances deserving to be mentioned here, took place in the early part of the day on which we expected the visit of the two oculists. I have all the will to relate them--but the capacity to do it completely fails me.

When I look back at that eventful morning, I recall a scene of confusion and suspense, the bare recollection of which seems to upset my mind again, even at this distance of time. Things and persons all blend distractedly one with another. I see the charming figure of my blind Lucilla, robed in rose-color and white, flitting hither and thither, in the house and out of the house--at one time mad with impatience for the arrival of the surgeons; at another, shuddering with apprehension of the coming ordeal, and the coming disappointment which might follow. A moment more--and, just as my mind has seized it, the fair figure melts and merges into the miserable apparition of Oscar; hovering and hesitating between Browndown and the rectory; painfully conscious of the new complications introduced into his position towards Lucilla by the new state of things; and yet not man enough, even yet, to seize the opportunity, and set himself right. Another moment passes, and a new figure--a little strutting consequential figure forces its way into the foreground, before I am ready for it. I hear a big voice booming in my ear, with big language to correspond. "No, Madame Pratulungo, nothing will induce me to sanction by my presence this insane medical consultation, this extravagant and profane attempt to reverse the decrees of an all-wise Providence by purely human means. My foot is down--I use the language of the people, observe, to impress it the more strongly on your mind--My FOOT is down!" Another moment yet, and Finch and Finch's Foot disappear over my mental horizon just as my eye has caught them. Damp Mrs. Finch, and the baby whose everlasting programme is suction and sleep, take the vacant place. Mrs. Finch pledges me with watery earnestness to secrecy; and then confides her intention of escaping her husband's supervision if she can, and bringing British surgery and German surgery to bear both together (gratis) on baby's eyes. Conceive these persons all twisting and turning in the convolutions of my brains, as if those brains were a labyrinth; with the sayings and doings of one, confusing themselves with the sayings and doings of the other--with a thin stream of my own private anxieties (comprehending luncheon on a side-table for the doctors) trickling at intervals through it all--and you will not wonder if I take a jump, like a sheep, over some six hours of precious time, and present my solitary

self to your eye, posted alone in the sitting-room to receive the council of surgeons on its arrival at the house. I had but two consolations to sustain me.

First, a Mayonnaise of chicken of my own making on the luncheon-table, which, as a work of Art, was simply adorable--I say no more. Secondly, my green silk dress, trimmed with my mother's famous lace--another work of Art, equally adorable with the first. Whether I looked at the luncheon-table, or whether I looked in the glass, I could feel that I worthily asserted my nation; I could say to myself, Even in this remote corner of the earth, the pilgrim of civilization searching for the elegant luxuries of life, looks and sees--France supreme!

The clock chimed the quarter past three. Lucilla, wearying, for the hundredth time of waiting in her own room, put her head in at the door, and still repeated the never-changing question--"No signs of them yet?"

"None, my love."

"Oh, how much longer will they keep us waiting!"

"Patience, Lucilla--patience!"

She disappeared again, with a weary sigh. Five minutes more passed; and old Zillah peeped into the room next.

"Here they are, ma'am, in a chaise at the gate!"

I shook out the skirts of my green silk, I cast a last inspiriting glance at the Mayonnaise. Nugent's cheerful voice reached me from the garden, conducting the strangers. "This way, gentlemen--follow me." A pause. Steps outside. The door opened. Nugent brought them in.

Herr Grosse, from America. Mr. Sebright of London.

The German gave a little start when my name was mentioned. The Englishman remained perfectly unaffected by it. Herr Grosse had heard of my glorious Pratolungo. Mr. Sebright was barbarously ignorant of his existence. I shall describe Herr Grosse first, and shall take the greatest pains with him.

A squat, broad, sturdy body, waddling on a pair of short bandy legs; slovenly, shabby, unbrushed clothes; a big square bilious-yellow face, surmounted by a mop of thick iron-grey hair; dark beetle-brows; a pair of staring, fierce, black, goggle eyes, with huge circular spectacles standing up like fortifications in front of them; a shaggy beard and mustache of mixed black, white, and grey; a prodigious cameo ring on the forefinger of one hairy hand; the other hand always in and out of a deep silver snuff-box like a small tea-caddy; a rough rasping voice; a diabolically humourous smile; a curtly confident way of speaking; resolution, independence, power, expressed all over him from head to foot--there is the portrait of the man who held in his hands (if Nugent was to be trusted) the restoration of Lucilla's sight!

The English oculist was as unlike his German colleague as it is possible for one human being to be to another.

Mr. Sebright was slim and spare, and scrupulously (painfully) clean and neat. His smooth light hair was carefully parted; his well-shaved face exhibited two little crisp morsels of whisker about two inches long, and no hair more. His decent black clothes were perfectly made; he wore no ornaments, not even a watch-chain; he moved deliberately, he spoke gravely and quietly; disciplined attention looked coldly at you out of his light grey eyes; and said, Here I am if you want me, in every movement of his thin finely-cut lips. A thoroughly capable man, beyond all doubt--but defend me from accidentally sitting next to him at dinner, or traveling with him for my only companion on a long journey!

I received these distinguished persons with my best grace. Herr Grosse complimented me in return on my illustrious name, and shook hands. Mr. Sebright said it was a beautiful day, and bowed. The German, the moment he was at liberty to look about him, looked at the luncheon-table. The Englishman looked out of window.

"Will you take some refreshment, gentlemen?"

Herr Grosse nodded his shock head in high approval. His wild eyes glared greedily at the Mayonnaise through his prodigious spectacles. "Aha! I like that," said the illustrious surgeon, pointing at the dish with his ringed forefinger. "You know how to make him--you make him with creams. Is he chickens or lobsters? I like lobsters best, but chickens is goot too. The garnish is lofely--anchovy, olive, beetroots; brown, green, red, on a fat white sauce! This I call a heavenly dish. He is nice-cool in two different ways; nice-cool, to the eye, nice-cool to the taste! Soh! we will break into his inside.

Madame Pratolungo, you shall begin. Here goes for the liver-wings!"

In this extraordinary English--turning words in the singular into words in the plural, and banishing from the British vocabulary the copulative conjunction "and"--Herr Grosse announced his readiness to sit down to lunch. He was politely recalled from the Mayonnaise to the patient by his discreet English colleague.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Sebright. "Would it not be advisable to see the young lady, before we do anything else? I am obliged to return to London by the next train."

Herr Grosse--with a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other, and a napkin tied round his neck--stared piteously; shook his shock head; and turned his back on the Mayonnaise, with a heavy heart at parting.

"Goot. We shall do our works first: then eat our lunches afterwards. Where is the patients? Come--begin--begin!" He removed the napkin, blew a sigh (there is no other way of expressing it)--and plunged his finger and thumb into his tea-caddy snuff-box. "Where is the patients?" he repeated irritably. "Why is she not close-handy in here?"

"She is waiting in the next room," I said. "I will bring her in directly. You will make allowances for her, gentlemen, I am sure, if you find her a little nervous?" I added, looking at both the oculists. Silent Mr. Sebright bowed. Herr Grosse grinned diabolically, and said, "Make your mind easy, my goot creature. I am not such a brutes as I look!"

"Where is Oscar?" asked Nugent, as I passed him on my way to Lucilla's room.

"After altering his mind a dozen times at least," I replied, "he has decided on not being present at the examination."

I had barely said the words before the door opened, and Oscar entered the room. He had altered his mind for the thirteenth time--and here he was as the result of it!

Herr Grosse burst out with an exclamation in his own language, at the sight of Oscar's face. "Ach, Gott!" he exclaimed, "he has been taking Nitrates of Silvers. His complexions is spoilt. Poor boys! poor boys!" He shook his shaggy head--turned--and spat compassionately into a corner of the room. Oscar looked offended; Mr. Sebright looked disgusted; Nugent thoroughly

enjoyed it. I left the room and closed the door behind me.

I had not taken two steps in the corridor when I heard the door opened again. Looking back directly, I found myself, to my amazement, face to face with Herr Grosse--staring ferociously at me through his spectacles, and offering me his arm!

"Hosh!" said the famous oculist in a heavy whisper. "Say nothing to nobody. I am come to help you."

"To help me?" I repeated.

Herr Grosse nodded vehemently--so vehemently that his prodigious spectacles hopped up and down on his nose.

"What did you tell me just now?" he asked. "You told me the patient was nervous. Goot! I am come to go with you to the patients, and help you to fetch her. Soh! soh! I am not such a brutes as I look. Come-begin-begin! Where is she?"

I hesitated for a moment about introducing this remarkable ambassador into Lucilla's bedroom. One look at him decided me. After all, he was a doctor,--and such an ugly one! I took his arm.

We went together into Lucilla's room. She started up from the sofa on which she was reclining when she heard the strange footsteps entering, side by side with mine.

"Who is it?" she cried.

"It is me, my dears," said Herr Grosse. "Ach, Gott! what a pretty girls! Here is jost the complexions I like-nice-fair! nice-fair! I am come to see what I can do, my pretty Miss, for this eyes of yours. If I can let the light in on you--hey! you will lofe me, won't you? You will kees even an ugly Germans like me. Soh! Come under my arm. We will go back into the odder rooms. There is anodder one waiting to let the light in too--Mr. Sebrights. Two surgeon-optic to one pretty Miss--English surgeon-optic; German surgeon-optic--hey! between us we shall cure this nice girls. Madame Pratolungo, here is my odder arms at your service. Hey! what? You look at my coatsleeve. He is shabby-greasy--I am ashamed of him. No matter. You have got Mr. Sebrights to look at in the odder rooms. He is spick-span, beautiful-new. Come! Forwards! Marsch!"

Nugent, waiting in the corridor, threw the door open for us. "Isn't he delightful?" Nugent whispered behind me, pointing to his friend. Escorted by Herr Grosse, we made a magnificent entry into the room. Our German doctor had done Lucilla good already. The examination was relieved of all its embarrassments and its terrors at the outset. Herr Grosse had made her laugh--Herr Grosse had set her completely at her ease.

Mr. Sebright and Oscar were talking together in a perfectly friendly way when we returned to the sitting-room. The reserved Englishman appeared to have his attraction for the shy Oscar. Even Mr. Sebright was struck by Lucilla; his cold face lit up with interest when he was presented to her. He placed a chair for her in front of the window. There was a warmth in his tone which I had not heard yet, when he begged her to be seated in that place. She took the chair. Mr. Sebright thereupon drew back, and bowed to Herr Grosse, with a courteous wave of his hand towards Lucilla which signified, "You first!"

Herr Grosse met this advance with a counter-wave of the hand, and a vehement shake of his shock-head, which signified, "I couldn't think of such a thing!"

"Pardon me," entreated Mr. Sebright. "As my senior, as a visitor to England, as a master in our art."

Herr Grosse responded by regaling himself with three pinches of snuff in rapid succession--a pinch as senior, a pinch as visitor to England, a pinch as master in the art. An awful pause followed. Neither of the surgeons would take precedence of the other. Nugent interfered.

"Miss Finch is waiting," he said. "Come, Grosse, you were first presented to her. You examine her first."

Herr Grosse took Nugent's ear between his finger and thumb, and gave it a good-humoured pinch. "You clever boys!" he said. "You have the right word always at the tips of your tongue." He waddled to Lucilla's chair; and stopped short with a scandalized look. Oscar was bending over her, and whispering to her with her hand in his. "Hey! what?" cried Herr Grosse. "Is this a third surgeon-optic? What, sir! you treat young Miss's eyes by taking hold of young Miss's hand? You are a Quack. Get out!" Oscar withdrew--not very graciously. Herr Grosse took a chair in front of Lucilla, and removed his spectacles. As a short-sighted man, he had necessarily excellent eyes for all objects which were sufficiently near to him. He bent forward, with his face close to Lucilla's, and parted her eyelids alternately with his finger and

thumb; peering attentively, first into one eye, then into the other.

It was a moment of breathless interest. Who could say what an influence on her future life might be exercised by this quaint kindly uncouth little foreign man? How anxiously we watched those shaggy eyebrows, those piercing goggle eyes! And, oh, heavens, how disappointed we were at the first result! Lucilla suddenly gave a little irrepressible shudder of disgust. Herr Grosse drew back from her, and glared at her benignantly with his diabolical smile.

"Aha!" he said. "I see what it is. I snuff, I smoke, I reek of tobaccos. The pretty Miss smells me. She says in her inmost heart--Ach Gott, how he stink!"

Lucilla burst into a fit of laughter. Herr Grosse, unaffectedly amused on his side, grinned with delight, and snatched her handkerchief out of her apron-pocket. "Gif me scents," said this excellent German. "I shall stop up her nose with her handkerchiefs. So she will not smell my tobacco-stinks--all will be nice-right again--we shall go on." I gave him some lavender-water from a scent-bottle on the table. He gravely drenched the handkerchief with it, and popped it suddenly on Lucilla's nose. "Hold him there, Miss. You cannot for the life of you smell Grosse now. Goot! We may go on again."

He took a magnifying glass out of his waistcoat pocket, and waited till Lucilla had fairly exhausted herself with laughing. Then the examination--so cruelly grotesque in itself, so terribly serious in the issues which it involved--resumed its course: Herr Grosse glaring at his patient through his magnifying glass; Lucilla leaning back in the chair, holding the handkerchief over her nose.

A minute, or more, passed--and the ordeal of the examination came to an end.

Herr Grosse put back his magnifying glass with a grunt which sounded like a grunt of relief, and snatched the handkerchief away from Lucilla.

"Ach! what a nasty smell!" he said, holding the handkerchief to his nose with a grimace of disgust. "Tobaccos is much better than this." He solaced his nostrils, offended by the lavender-water, with a huge pinch of snuff. "Now I am going to talk," he went on. "See! I keep my distance. You don't want your handkerchiefs--you smell me no more."

"Am I blind for life?" said Lucilla. "Pray, pray tell me, sir! Am I blind for life?"

"Will you kees me if I tell you?"

"Oh, do consider how anxious I am! Pray, pray, pray tell me!"

She tried to go down on her knees before him. He held her back firmly and kindly in her chair.

"Now! now! now! you be nice-goot, and tell me this first. When you are out in the garden, taking your little lazy lady's walks on a shiny-sunny day, is it all the same to your eyes as if you were lying in your bed in the middles of the night?"

"No."

"Hah! You know it is nice-light at one time? you know it is horrid-dark at the odder?"

"Yes."

"Then why you ask me if you are blind for life? If you can see as much as that, you are not properly blind at all?"

She clasped her hands, with a low cry of delight. "Oh, where is Oscar?" she said softly. "Where is Oscar?" I looked round for him. He was gone. While his brother and I had been hanging spell-bound over the surgeon's questions and the patient's answers, he must have stolen silently out of the room.

Herr Grosse rose, and vacated the chair in favor of Mr. Sebright. In the ecstasy of the new hope now confirmed in her, Lucilla seemed to be unconscious of the presence of the English oculist, when he took his colleague's place. His grave face looked more serious than ever, as he too produced a magnifying glass from his pocket, and, gently parting the patient's eyelids, entered on the examination of her blindness, in his turn.

The investigation by Mr. Sebright lasted a much longer time than the investigation by Herr Grosse. He pursued it in perfect silence. When he had done he rose without a word, and left Lucilla as he had found her, rapt in the trance of her own happiness--thinking, thinking, thinking of the time when she should open her eyes in the new morning, and see!

"Well?" said Nugent, impatiently addressing Mr. Sebright. "What do you say?"

"I say nothing yet." With that implied reproof to Nugent, he turned to me. "I understand that Miss Finch was blind--or as nearly blind as could be discovered--at a year old?"

"I have always heard so," I replied.

"Is there any person in the house--parent, or relative, or servant--who can speak to the symptoms noticed when she was an infant?"

I rang the bell for Zillah. "Her mother is dead," I said. "And there are reasons which prevent her father from being present to-day. Her old nurse will be able to give you all the information you want."

Zillah appeared. Mr. Sebright put his questions.

"Were you in the house when Miss Finch was born?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was there anything wrong with her eyes at her birth, or soon afterwards?"

"Nothing, sir."

"How did you know?"

"I knew by seeing her take notice, sir. She used to stare at the candles, and clutch at things that were held before her, as other babies do."

"How did you discover it, when she began to get blind?"

"In the same way, sir. There came a time, poor little thing, when her eyes looked glazed-like, and try her as we might, morning or evening, it was all the same--she noticed nothing."

"Did the blindness come on gradually?"

"Yes, sir--bit by bit, as you may say. Slowly worse and worse one week after another. She was a little better than a year old before we clearly made it out that her sight was gone."

"Was her father's sight, or her mother's sight ever affected in any way?"

"Never, sir, that I heard of."

Mr. Sebright turned to Herr Grosse, sitting at the luncheon-table resignedly contemplating the Mayonnaise. "Do you wish to ask the nurse any questions?" he said.

Herr Grosse shrugged his shoulders, and pointed backwards with his thumb at the place in which Lucilla was sitting.

"Her case is as plain to me as twos and twos make fours. Ach Gott! what do I want with the nurse?" He turned again longingly towards the Mayonnaise. "My fine appetites is going! When shall we lonch?"

Mr. Sebright dismissed Zillah with a frigid inclination of the head. His discouraging manner made me begin to feel a little uneasy. I ventured to ask if he had arrived at a conclusion yet. "Permit me to consult with my colleague before I answer you," said the impenetrable man. I roused Lucilla. She again inquired for Oscar. I said I supposed we should find him in the garden--and so took her out. Nugent followed us. I heard Herr Grosse whisper to him piteously, as we passed the luncheon-table, "For the lofe of Heaven, come back soon, and let us lonch!" We left the ill-assorted pair to their consultation in the sitting-room.