

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FIRST

"Who Shall Decide when Doctors disagree?"

WE had certainly not been more than ten minutes in the garden, when we were startled by an extraordinary outbreak of shouting in broken English, proceeding from the window of the sitting-room. "Hi-hi-hoi! hoi-hi! hoi-hi!" We looked up, and discovered Herr Grosse, frantically waving a huge red silk handkerchief at the window. "Lonch! lonch!" cried the German surgeon. "The consultations is done. Come begin-begin."

Obedient to this peremptory summons, Lucilla, Nugent, and I returned to the sitting-room. We had, as I had foreseen, found Oscar wandering alone in the garden. He had entreated me, by a sign, not to reveal our discovery of him to Lucilla, and had hurried away to hide himself in one of the side-walks. His agitation was pitiable to see. He was totally unfit to be trusted in Lucilla's presence at that anxious moment.

When we had left the oculists together, I had sent Zillah with a little written message to Reverend Finch; entreating him (if it was only for form's sake) to reconsider his resolution, and be present on the all-important occasion to his daughter of the delivery of the medical opinions on her case. At the bottom of the stairs (on our return), my answer was handed to me on a slip of sermon-paper. "Mr. Finch declined to submit a question of principle to any considerations dictated by mere expediency. He desired seriously to remind Madame Pratolungo of what he had already told her. In other words, he would repeat, and he would beg her to remember this time, that his Foot was down."

On re-entering the room, we found the eminent oculists seated as far apart as possible one from the other. Both gentlemen were engaged in reading. Mr. Sebright was reading a book. Herr Grosse was reading the Mayonnaise.

I placed Lucilla close by me, and took her hand. It was as cold as ice. My poor dear trembled pitifully. For her, what moments of unutterable suffering were those moments of suspense, before the surgeons delivered their sentence! I pressed her little cold hand in mine, and whispered "Courage!" Truly I can say it (though I am not usually one of the sentimental sort), my heart bled for her.

"Well, gentlemen," said Nugent, "what is the result? Are you both agreed?"

"No," said Mr. Sebright, putting aside his book.

"No," said Herr Grosse, ogling the Mayonnaise. Lucilla turned her face towards me; her color shifting and changing, her bosom rising and falling more and more rapidly. I whispered to her to compose herself. "One of them, at any rate," I said, "thinks you will recover your sight." She understood me, and became quieter directly. Nugent went on with his questions, addressed to the two oculists.

"What do you differ about?" he asked. "Will you let us hear your opinions?"

The wearisome contest of courtesy was renewed between our medical advisers. Mr. Sebright bowed to Herr Grosse:

"You first." Herr Grosse bowed to Mr. Sebright: "No--you!" My impatience broke through this cruel and ridiculous professional restraint. "Speak both together, gentlemen, if you like!" I said sharply. "Do anything, for God's sake, but keep us in suspense. Is it, or is it not, possible to restore her sight?"

"Yes," said Herr Grosse.

Lucilla sprang to her feet, with a cry of joy.

"No," said Mr. Sebright.

Lucilla dropped back again into her chair, and silently laid her head on my shoulder.

"Are you agreed about the cause of her blindness?" asked Nugent.

"Cataracts is the cause," answered Herr Grosse.

"So far, I agree," said Mr. Sebright. "Cataract is the cause.

"Cataracts is curable," pursued the German.

"I agree again," continued the Englishman--"with a reservation. Cataract is sometimes curable."

"This cataracts is curable!" cried Herr Grosse.

"With all possible deference," said Mr. Sebright, "I dispute that conclusion. The cataract, in Miss Finch's case, is not curable."

"Can you give us your reasons, sir, for saying that?" I inquired.

"My reasons are based on surgical considerations which it requires a professional training to understand," Mr. Sebright replied. "I can only tell you that I am convinced--after the most minute and careful examination--that Miss Finch's sight is irrevocably gone. Any attempt to restore it by an operation, would be, in my opinion, an unwarrantable proceeding. The young lady would not only have the operation to undergo, she would be kept secluded afterwards, for at least six weeks or two months, in a darkened room. During that time, it is needless for me to remind you that she would inevitably form the most confident hope of her restoration to sight. Remembering this, and believing as I do that the sacrifice demanded of her would end in failure, I think it most undesirable to expose our patient to the moral consequences of a disappointment which must seriously try her. She has been resigned from childhood to her blindness. As an honest man, who feels bound to speak out and to speak strongly, I advise you not further to disturb that resignation. I declare it to be, in my opinion, certainly useless, and possibly dangerous, to allow her to be operated on for the restoration of her sight."

In those uncompromising words, the Englishman delivered his opinion.

Lucilla's hand closed fast on mine. "Cruel! cruel!" she whispered to herself angrily. I gave her a little squeeze, recommending patience--and looked in silent expectation (just as Nugent was looking too) at Herr Grosse. The German rose deliberately to his feet, and waddled to the place in which Lucilla and I were sitting together.

"Has goot Mr. Sebrights done?" he asked.

Mr. Sebright only replied by his everlasting never-changing bow.

"Goot! I have now my own word to put in," said Herr Grosse. "It shall be one little word--no more. With my best compliments to Mr. Sebrights, I set up against what he only thinks, what I--Grosse--with these hands of mine have done. The cataracts of Miss there, is a cataracts that I have cut into before, a cataracts that I have cured before. Now look!" He suddenly wheeled round to Lucilla, tucked up his cuffs, laid a forefinger of each hand on either side of her forehead, and softly turned down her eyelids with his two big thumbs. "I pledge you my word as surgeon-optic," he resumed, "my knife shall let the

light in here. This lovable-nice girls shall be more lovable-nicer than ever. My pretty Feench must be first in her best goot health. She must next gif me my own ways with her--and then one, two, three--ping! my pretty Feench shall see!" He lifted Lucilla's eyelids again as he said the last word--glared fiercely at her through his spectacles--gave her the loudest kiss, on the forehead, that I ever heard given in my life--laughed till the room rang again--and returned to his post as sentinel on guard over the Mayonnaise. "Now," cried Herr Grosse cheerfully, "the talkings is all done. Gott be thanked, the eatings may begin!"

Lucilla left her chair for the second time.

"Herr Grosse," she said, "where are you?"

"Here, my dears!"

She crossed the room to the table at which he was sitting, already occupied in carving his favorite dish.

"Did you say you must use a knife to make me see?" she asked quite calmly.

"Yes, yes. Don't you be frightened of that. Not much pains to bear--not much pains."

She tapped him smartly on the shoulder with her hand.

"Get up, Herr Grosse," she said. "If you have your knife about you, here am I--do it at once!"

Nugent started. Mr. Sebright started. Her daring amazed them both. As for me, I am the greatest coward living, in the matter of surgical operations performed on myself or on others. Lucilla terrified me. I ran headlong across the room to her. I was even fool enough to scream.

Before I could reach her, Herr Grosse had risen, obedient to command, with a choice morsel of chicken on the end of his fork. "You charming little fools," he said, "I don't cut into cataracts in such a hurry as that. I perform but one operations on you to-day. It is this!" He unceremoniously popped the morsel of chicken into Lucilla's mouth. "Aha! Bite him well. He is nice-goot! Now then! Sit down all of you. Lonch! lonch!"

He was irresistible. We all sat down at table.

The rest of us ate. Herr Grosse gobbled. From Mayonnaise to marmalade tart. From marmalade tart back again to Mayonnaise. From Mayonnaise, forward again to ham sandwiches and blancmange; and then back once more (on the word of an honest woman) to Mayonnaise! His drinking was on the same scale as his eating. Beer, wine, brandy--nothing came amiss to him; he mixed them all. As for the lighter elements in the feast--the almonds and raisins, the preserved ginger and the crystallized fruits, he ate them as accompaniments to everything. A dish of olives especially won his favor. He plunged both hands into it, and deposited his fists-full of olives in the pockets of his trousers. "In this ways," he explained, "I shall trouble nobody to pass the dish--I shall have by me continually all the olives that I want." When he could eat and drink no more, he rolled up his napkin into a ball, and became devoutly thankful. "How goot of Gott," he remarked, "when he invented the worlds to invent eatings and drinkings too! Ah!" sighed Herr Grosse, gently laying his outspread fingers on the pit of his stomach, "what immense happiness there is in This!"

Mr. Sebright looked at his watch.

"If there is anything more to be said on the question of the operation," he announced, "it must be said at once. We have barely five minutes more to spare. You have heard my opinion. I hold to it."

Herr Grosse took a pinch of snuff. "I also," he said, "hold to mine."

Lucilla turned towards the place from which Mr. Sebright had spoken.

"I am obliged to you, sir, for your opinion," she said, very quietly and firmly. "I am determined to try the operation. If it does fail, it will only leave me what I am now. If it succeeds, it gives me a new life. I will bear anything, and risk anything, on the chance that I may see."

So, she announced her decision. In those memorable words, she cleared the way for the coming Event in her life and in our lives, which it is the purpose of these pages to record.

Mr. Sebright answered her, in Mr. Sebright's discreet way.

"I cannot affect to be surprised at your decision," he said. "However sincerely I may regret it, I admit that it is the natural decision, in your case."

Lucilla addressed herself next to Herr Grosse.

"Choose your own day," she said. "The sooner, the better. To-morrow, if you can."

"Answer me one little thing, Miss," rejoined the German, with a sudden gravity of tone and manner which was quite new in our experience of him.

"Do you mean what you say?"

She answered him gravely on her side. "I mean what I say."

"Goot. There is times, my lofe, to be funny. There is also times to be grave. It is grave-times now. I have my last word to say to you before I go."

With his wild black eyes staring through his owlish spectacles at Lucilla's face, speaking earnestly in his strange broken English, he now impressed on his patient the necessity of gravely considering, and preparing for, the operation which he had undertaken to perform.

I was greatly relieved by the tone he took with her. He spoke with authority: she would be obliged to listen to him.

In the first place, he warned Lucilla, if the operation failed, that there would be no possibility of returning to it, and trying it again. Once done, be the results what they might, it was done for good.

In the second place, before he would consent to operate, he must insist on certain conditions, essential to success, being rigidly complied with, on the part of the patient and her friends. Mr. Sebright had by no means exaggerated the length of the time of trial which would follow the operation, in the darkened room. Under no circumstances could she hope to have her eyes uncovered, even for a few moments, to the light, after a shorter interval than six weeks. During the whole of that time, and probably during another six weeks to follow, it was absolutely necessary that she should be kept in such a state of health as would assist her, constitutionally, in her gradual progress towards complete restoration of sight. If body and mind both were not preserved in their best and steadiest condition, all that his skill could do might be done in vain. Nothing to excite or to agitate her, must be allowed to find its way into the quiet daily routine of her life, until her medical attendant was satisfied that her sight was safe. The success of Herr Grosse's professional career had been due, in no small degree, to his rigid enforcement of these rules: founded on his own experience of the influence which a patient's general health, moral as well as physical, exercised on that patient's chance of profiting under an operation--more especially under an operation on an organ so delicate as the organ of sight.

Having spoken to this effect, he appealed to Lucilla's own good sense to recognize the necessity of taking time to consider her decision, and to consult on it with relatives and friends. In plain words, for at least three months the family arrangements must be so shaped, as to enable the surgeon in attendance on her to hold the absolute power of regulating her life, and of deciding on any changes introduced into it. When she and the members of her family circle were sure of being able to comply with these conditions, Lucilla had only to write to him at his hotel in London. On the next day he would undertake to be at Dimchurch. And then and there (if he was satisfied with the state of her health at the time), he would perform the operation.

After pledging himself in those terms, Herr Grosse puffed out his remaining breath in one deep guttural "Hah!"--and got briskly on his short legs. At the same moment, Zillah knocked at the door, and announced that the chaise was waiting for the two gentlemen at the rectory-gate.

Mr. Sebright rose--in some doubt, apparently, whether his colleague had done talking. "Don't let me hurry you," he said. "I have business in London; and I must positively catch the next train."

"Soh! I have my business in London, too," answered his brother-oculist--"the business of pleasure." (Mr. Sebright looked scandalized at the frankness of this confession, coming from a professional man). "I am so passion-fond of musics," Herr Grosse went on--"I want to be in goot times for the opera. Ach Gott! musics is expensive in England! I climb to the gallery, and pay my five silver shillingses even there. For five copper pences, in my own country, I can get the same thing--only better done. From the deep bottoms of my heart," proceeded this curious man, taking a cordial leave of me, "I thank you, dear madam, for the Mayonnaise. When I come again, I pray you more of that lofely dish." He turned to Lucilla, and popped his thumb on her eyelids for the last time at parting. "My sweet-Feench, remember what your surgeon-optic has said to you. I shall let the light in here--but in my own way, at my own time. Pretty lofe! Ah, how infinitely much prettier she will be, when she can see!" He took Lucilla's hand, and put it sentimentally inside the collar of his waistcoat, over the region of the heart; laying his other hand upon it as if he was keeping it warm. In this tender attitude, he blew a prodigious sigh; recovered himself, with a shake of his shock-head; winked at me through his spectacles, and waddled out after Mr. Sebright, who was already at the bottom of the stairs. Who would have guessed that this man held the key which was to open for my blind Lucilla the gates of a new life!