

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SECOND

Alas for the Marriage!

WE were left together; Nugent having accompanied the two oculists to the garden-gate.

Now that we were alone, Oscar's absence could hardly fail to attract Lucilla's attention. Just as she was referring to him in terms which made it no easy task for me to quiet her successfully, we were interrupted by the screams of the baby, ascending from the garden below. I ran to the window, and looked out.

Mrs. Finch had actually effected her desperate purpose of waylaying the two surgeons in the interests of "baby's eyes." There she was, in a skirt and a shawl--with her novel dropped in one part of the lawn, and her handkerchief in the other--pursuing the oculists on their way to the chaise. Reckless of appearances, Herr Grosse had taken to his heels. He was retreating from the screeching infant (with his fingers stuffed into his ears), as fast as his short legs would let him. Nugent was ahead of him, hurrying on to open the garden-gate. Respectable Mr. Sebright (professionally incapable of running) brought up the rear. At short intervals, Mrs. Finch, close on his heels, held up the baby for inspection. At short intervals, Mr. Sebright held up his hands in polite protest. Nugent, roaring with laughter, threw open the garden-gate. Herr Grosse rushed through the opening, and disappeared. Mr. Sebright followed Herr Grosse; and Mrs. Finch attempted to follow Mr. Sebright--when a new personage appeared on the scene. Startled in the sanctuary of his study by the noise, the rector himself strutted into the garden, and brought his wife to a sudden standstill, by inquiring in his deepest base notes, "What does this unseemly disturbance mean?"

The chaise drove off; and Nugent closed the garden-gate.

Some words, inaudible to my ears, passed between Nugent and the rector--referring, as I could only suppose, to the visit of the two departing surgeons. After awhile, Mr. Finch turned away (to all appearance offended by something which had been said to him), and addressed himself to Oscar, who now reappeared on the lawn; having evidently only waited to show himself, until the chaise drove away. The rector paternally took his arm; and, beckoning to his wife with the other hand, took Mrs. Finch's arm next. Majestically marching back to the house between the two, Reverend Finch

asserted himself and his authority alternately, now to Oscar and now to his wife. His big booming voice reached my ears distinctly, accompanied in sharp discord by the last wailings of the exhausted child.

In these terrible words the Pope of Dimchurch began:--"Oscar! you are to understand distinctly, if you please, that I maintain my protest against this impious attempt to meddle with my afflicted daughter's sight.--Mrs. Finch! you are to understand that I excuse your unseemly pursuit of two strange surgeons, in consideration of the state that I find you in at this moment. After your last confinement but eight you became, I remember, hysterically irresponsible. Hold your tongue. You are hysterically irresponsible now.--Oscar! I decline, in justice to myself, to be present at any discussion which may follow the visit of those two professional persons. But I am not averse to advising you for your own good. My Foot is down. Put your foot down too.--Mrs. Finch! how long is it since you ate last? Two hours? Are you sure it is two hours? Very good. You require a sedative application. I order you, medically, to get into a warm bath, and stay there till I come to you.--Oscar! you are deficient, my good fellow, in moral weight. Endeavor to oppose yourself resolutely to any scheme, on the part of my unhappy daughter or of those who advise her, which involves more expenditure of money in fees, and new appearances of professional persons.--Mrs. Finch! the temperature is to be ninety-eight, and the position partially recumbent.--Oscar! I authorize you (if you can't stop it in any other way) to throw My moral weight into the scale. You are free to say 'I oppose This, with Mr. Finch's approval: I am, so to speak, backed by Mr. Finch.'--Mrs. Finch! I wish you to understand the object of the bath. Hold your tongue. The object is to produce a gentle action on your skin. One of the women is to keep her eye on your forehead. The instant she perceives an appearance of moisture, she is to run for me.--Oscar! you will let me know at what decision they arrive, up-stairs in my daughter's room. Not after they have merely heard what you have to say, but after My Moral Weight has been thrown into the scale.--Mrs. Finch! on leaving the bath, I shall have you only lightly clothed. I forbid, with a view to your head, all compression, whether of stays or strings, round the waist. I forbid garters--with the same object. You will abstain from tea and talking. You will lie, loose, on your back. You will----"

What else this unhappy woman was to do, I failed to hear. Mr. Finch disappeared with her, round the corner of the house. Oscar waited at the door of our side of the rectory, until Nugent joined him, on their way back to the sitting-room in which we were expecting their return.

After an interval of a few minutes, the brothers appeared.

Throughout the whole of the time during which the surgeons had been in the house, I had noticed that Nugent persisted in keeping himself scrupulously in the background. Having assumed the responsibility of putting the serious question of Lucilla's sight scientifically to the test, he appeared to be resolved to pause there, and to interfere no further in the affair after it had passed its first stage. And now again, when we were met in our little committee to discuss, and possibly to combat, Lucilla's resolution to proceed to extremities, he once more refrained from interfering actively with the matter in hand.

"I have brought Oscar back with me," he said to Lucilla; "and I have told him how widely the two oculists differ in opinion on your case. He knows also that you have decided on being guided by the more favorable view taken by Herr Grosse--and he knows no more."

There he stopped abruptly and seated himself apart from us, at the lower end of the room.

Lucilla instantly appealed to Oscar to explain his conduct.

"Why have you kept out of the way?" she asked. "Why have you not been with me, at the most important moment of my life?"

"Because I felt your anxious position too keenly," Oscar answered. "Don't think me inconsiderate towards you, Lucilla. If I had not kept away, I might not have been able to control myself."

I thought that reply far too dexterous to have come from Oscar on the spur of the moment. Besides, he looked at his brother when he said the last words. It seemed more than likely--short as the interval had been before they appeared in the sitting-room--that Nugent had been advising Oscar, and had been telling him what to say.

Lucilla received his excuses with the readiest grace and kindness.

"Mr. Sebright tells me, Oscar, that my sight is hopelessly gone," she said. "Herr Grosse answers for it that an operation will make me see. Need I tell you which of the two I believe in? If I could have had my own way, Herr Grosse should have operated on my eyes, before he went back to London."

"Did he refuse?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lucilla told him of the reasons which the German oculist had stated as unanswerable reasons for delay. Oscar listened attentively, and looked at his brother again, before he replied.

"As I understand it," he said, "if you decide on risking the operation at once, you decide on undergoing six weeks' imprisonment in a darkened room, and on placing yourself entirely at the surgeon's disposal for six weeks more, after that. Have you considered, Lucilla, that this means putting off our marriage again, for at least three months?"

"If you were in my place, Oscar, you would let nothing, not even your marriage, stand in the way of your restoration to sight. Don't ask me to consider, love. I can consider nothing but the prospect of seeing You!"

That fearlessly frank confession silenced him. He happened to be sitting opposite to the glass, so that he could see his face. The poor wretch abruptly moved his chair, so as to turn his back on it.

I looked at Nugent, and surprised him trying to catch his brother's eye. Prompted by him, as I could now no longer doubt, Oscar had laid his finger on a certain domestic difficulty which I had had in my mind, from the moment when the question of the operation had been first agitated among us.

(The marriage of Oscar and Lucilla--it is here necessary to explain--had encountered another obstacle, and undergone a new delay, in consequence of the dangerous illness of Lucilla's aunt. Miss Batchford, formally invited to the ceremony as a matter of course, had most considerately sent a message begging that the marriage might not be deferred on her account. Lucilla, however, had refused to allow her wedding to be celebrated, while the woman who had been a second mother to her, lay at the point of death. The rector having an eye to rich Miss Batchford's money--not for himself (Miss B. detested him), but for Lucilla--had supported his daughter's decision; and Oscar had been compelled to submit. These domestic events had taken place about three weeks since; and we were now in receipt of news which not only assured us of the old lady's recovery, but informed us also that she would be well enough to make one of the wedding party in a fortnight's time. The bride's dress was in the house; the bride's father was ready to officiate--

and here, like a fatality, was the question of the operation unexpectedly starting up, and threatening another delay yet, for a period which could not possibly be shorter than a period of three months! Add to this, if you please, a new element of embarrassment as follows. Supposing Lucilla to persist in her resolution, and Oscar to persist in concealing from her the personal change in him produced by the medical treatment of the fits, what would happen? Nothing less than this. Lucilla, if the operation succeeded, would find out for herself--before instead of after her marriage--the deception that had been practiced on her. And how she might resent that deception, thus discovered, the cleverest person among us could not pretend to foresee. There was our situation, as we sat in domestic parliament assembled, when the surgeons had left us!)

Finding it impossible to attract his brother's attention, Nugent had no alternative but to interfere actively for the first time.

"Let me suggest, Lucilla," he said, "that it is your duty to look at the other side of the question, before you make up your mind. In the first place, it is surely hard on Oscar to postpone the wedding-day again. In the second place, clever as he is, Herr Grosse is not infallible. It is just possible that the operation may fail, and that you may find you have put off your marriage for three months, to no purpose. Do think of it! If you defer the operation on your eyes till after your marriage, you conciliate all interests, and you only delay by a month or so the time when you may see."

Lucilla impatiently shook her head.

"If you were blind," she answered, "you would not willingly delay by a single hour the time when you might see. You ask me to think of it. I ask you to think of the years I have lost. I ask you to think of the exquisite happiness I shall feel, when Oscar and I are standing at the altar, if I can see the husband to whom I am giving myself for life! Put it off for a month? You might as well ask me to die for a month. It is like death to be sitting here blind, and to know that a man is within a few hours' reach of me who can give me my sight! I tell you all plainly, if you go on opposing me in this, I don't answer for myself. If Herr Grosse is not recalled to Dimchurch before the end of the week--I am my own mistress; I will go to him in London!"

Both the brothers looked at me.

"Have you nothing to say, Madame Pratolungo?" asked Nugent.

Oscar was too painfully agitated to speak. He softly crossed to my chair;

and, kneeling by me, put my hand entreatingly to his lips.

You may consider me a heartless woman if you will. I remained entirely unmoved even by this. Lucilla's interests and my interests, you will observe, were now one. I had resolved, from the first, that she should not be married in ignorance of which was the man who was disfigured by the blue face. If she took the course which would enable her to make that discovery for herself, at the right time, she would spare me the performance of a very painful and ungracious duty--and she would marry, as I was determined she should marry, with a full knowledge of the truth. In this position of affairs, it was no business of mine to join the twin-brothers in trying to make her alter her resolution. On the contrary, it was my business to confirm her in it.

"I can't see that I have any right to interfere," I said. "In Lucilla's place--after one and twenty years of blindness--I too should sacrifice every other consideration to the consideration of recovering my sight."

Oscar instantly rose, offended with me, and walked away to the window. Lucilla's face brightened gratefully. "Ah!" she said, "you understand me!" Nugent, in his turn, left his chair. He had confidently calculated, in his brother's interests, on Lucilla's marriage preceding the recovery of Lucilla's sight. That calculation was completely baffled. The marriage would now depend on the state of Lucilla's feelings, after she had penetrated the truth for herself. I saw Nugent's face darken, as he walked to the door.

"Madame Pratolungo," he said, "you may, one day, regret the course that you have just taken. Do as you please, Lucilla--I have no more to say."

He left the room, with a quiet submission to circumstances which became him admirably. Now, as always, it was impossible not to compare him advantageously with his vacillating brother. Oscar turned round at the window, apparently with the idea of following Nugent out. At the first step he checked himself. There was a last effort still left to make. Reverend Finch's "moral weight" had not been thrown into the scale yet.

"There is one thing more, Lucilla," he said, "which you ought to know before you decide. I have seen your father. He desires me to tell you that he is strongly opposed to the experiment which you are determined to try."

Lucilla sighed wearily. "It is not the first time that I find my father failing to sympathize with me," she said. "I am distressed--but not surprised. It is you who surprise me!" she added, suddenly raising her voice. "You, who love me,

are not one with me, when I am standing on the brink of a new life. Good Heavens! are my interests not your interests in this? Is it not worth your while to wait till I can look at you when I vow before God to love, honor, and obey you? Do you understand him?" she asked, appealing abruptly to me. "Why does he try to start difficulties? why is he not as eager about it as I am?"

I turned to Oscar. Now was the time for him to fall at her feet and own it! Here was the golden opportunity that might never come again. I signed to him impatiently to take it. He tried to take it--let me do him the justice now, which I failed to do him at the time--he tried to take it. He advanced towards her; he struggled with himself; he said, "There is a motive for my conduct, Lucilla----" and stopped. His breath failed him; he struggled again; he forced out a word or two more: "A motive," he went on, "which I have been afraid to confess----" he paused again, with the perspiration pouring over his livid face.

Lucilla's patience failed her. "What is your motive?" she asked sharply.

The tone in which she spoke broke down his last reserves of resolution. He turned his head suddenly so as not to see her. At the final moment--miserable, miserable man!--at the final moment, he took refuge in an excuse.

"I don't believe in Herr Grosse," he said faintly, "as you believe in him."

Lucilla rose, bitterly disappointed, and opened the door that led into her own room.

"If it had been you who were blind," she answered, "your belief would have been my belief, and your hope my hope. It seems I have expected too much from you. Live and learn! live and learn!"

She went into her room, and closed the door on us. I could bear it no longer. I got up, with the firm resolution in me to follow her, and say the words which he had failed to say for himself. My hand was on the door, when I was suddenly pulled back from it by Oscar. I turned, and faced him in silence.

"No!" he said, with his eyes fixed on mine, and his hand still on my arm. "If I don't tell her, nobody shall tell her for me."

"She shall be deceived no longer--she must, and shall, hear it," I answered. "Let me go!"

"You have given me your promise to wait for my leave before you open your lips. I forbid you to open your lips."

I snapped the fingers of my hand that was free, in his face. "That for my promise!" I said. "Your contemptible weakness is putting her happiness in peril as well as yours." I turned my head towards the door, and called to her. "Lucilla!"

His hand closed fast on my arm. Some lurking devil in him that I had never seen yet, leapt up and looked at me out of his eyes.

"Tell her," he whispered savagely between his teeth; "and I will contradict you to your face! If you are desperate, I am desperate too. I don't care what meanness I am guilty of! I will deny it on my honor; I will deny it on my oath. You heard what she said about you at Browndown. She will believe me before you."

Lucilla opened her door, and stood waiting on the threshold.

"What is it?" she asked quietly.

A moment's glance at Oscar warned me that he would do what he had threatened, if I persisted in my resolution. The desperation of a weak man is, of all desperations, the most unscrupulous and the most unmanageable--when it is once roused. Angry as I was, I shrank from degrading him, as I must now have degraded him, if I matched my obstinacy against his. In mercy to both of them, I gave way.

"I may be going out, my dear, before it gets dark," I said to Lucilla. "Can I do anything for you in the village?"

"Yes," she said, "if you will wait a little, you can take a letter for me to the post."

She went back into her room, and closed the door.

I neither looked at Oscar, nor spoke to him, when we were alone again. He was the first who broke the silence.

"You have remembered your promise to me," he said. "You have done well."

"I have nothing more to say to you," I answered. "I shall go to my own room."

His eyes followed me uneasily as I walked to the door.

"I shall speak to her," he muttered doggedly, "at my own time."

A wise woman would not have allowed him to irritate her into saying another word. Alas! I am not a wise woman--that is to say, not always.

"Your own time?" I repeated with the whole force of my contempt. "If you don't own the truth to her before the German surgeon comes back, your time will have gone by for ever. He has told us in the plainest terms--when once the operation is performed, nothing must be said to agitate or distress her, for months afterwards. The preservation of her tranquillity is the condition of the recovery of her sight. You will soon have an excuse for your silence, Mr. Oscar Dubourg!"

The tone in which I said those last words stung him to some purpose.

"Spare your sneers, you heartless Frenchwoman!" he broke out angrily. "I don't care how I stand in your estimation. Lucilla loves me. Nugent feels for me."

My vile temper instantly hit on the most merciless answer that I could make to him in return.

"Ah, poor Lucilla!" I said. "What a much happier prospect hers might have been! What a thousand pities it is that she is not going to marry your brother, instead of marrying you!"

He winced under that reply, as if I had cut him with a knife. His head dropped on his breast. He started back from me like a beaten dog--and suddenly and silently left the room.

I had not been a minute by myself, before my anger cooled. I tried to keep it hot; I tried to remember that he had aspersed my nation in calling me a "heartless Frenchwoman." No! it was not to be done. In spite of myself, I repented what I had said to him.

In a moment more, I was out on the stairs to try if I could overtake him.

I was too late. I heard the garden-gate bang, before I was out of the house. Twice I approached the gate to follow him. And twice I drew back, in the fear of making bad worse. It ended in my returning to the sitting-room, very

seriously dissatisfied with myself.

The first welcome interruption to my solitude came--not from Lucilla--but from the old nurse. Zillah appeared with a letter for me: left that moment at the rectory by the servant from Browndown. The direction was in Oscar's handwriting. I opened the envelope, and read these words:--

"MADAME PRATOLUNGO,--YOU have distressed and pained me more than I can say. There are faults, and serious ones, on my side, I know. I heartily beg your pardon for anything that I may have said or done to offend you. I cannot submit to your hard verdict on me. If you knew how I adore Lucilla, you would make allowances for me--you would understand me better than you do. I cannot get your last cruel words out of my ears. I cannot meet you again without some explanation of them. You stabbed me to the heart, when you said to me this evening that it would be a happier prospect for Lucilla if she had been going to marry my brother instead of marrying me. I hope you did not really mean that? Will you please write and tell me whether you did or not?

"OSCAR."

Write and tell him? It was absurd enough--when we were within a few minutes' walk of each other--that Oscar should prefer the cold formality of a letter, to the friendly ease of a personal interview. Why could he not have called, and spoken to me? We should have made it up together far more comfortably in that way--and in half the time. At any rate, I determined to go to Browndown, and be good friends again, *vivâ-voce*, with this poor, weak, well-meaning, ill-judging boy. Was it not monstrous to have attached serious meaning to what Oscar had said when he was in a panic of nervous terror! His tone of writing so keenly distressed me that I resented his letter on that very account. It was one of the chilly evenings of an English June. A small fire was burning in the grate. I crumpled up the letter, and threw it, as I supposed, into the fire. (After-events showed that I only threw it into a corner of the fender instead.) Then, I put on my hat, without stopping to think of Lucilla, or of what she was writing for the post, and ran off to Browndown.

Where do you think I found him? Locked up in his own room! His insane shyness--it was really nothing less--made him shrink from that very personal explanation which (with such a temperament as mine) was the only possible explanation under the circumstances. I had to threaten him with forcing his door, before I could get him to show himself, and take my hand.

Once face to face with him, I soon set things right. I really believe he had been half mad with his own self-imposed troubles, when he had declared he would give me the lie at the door of Lucilla's room.

It is needless to dwell on what took place between us. I shall only say here that I had serious reason, at a later time--as you will soon see--to regret not having humoured Oscar's request that I should reconcile myself to him by writing, instead of by word of mouth. If I had only placed on record, in pen and ink, what I actually said in the way of making atonement to him, I might have spared some suffering to myself and to others. As it was, the only proof that I had absolved myself in his estimation consisted in his cordially shaking hands with me at the door, when I left him.

"Did you meet Nugent?" he asked, as he walked with me across the enclosure in front of the house.

I had gone to Browndown by a short cut at the back of the garden, instead of going through the village. Having mentioned this, I asked if Nugent had returned to the rectory.

"He went back to see you," said Oscar.

"Why?"

"Only his usual kindness. He takes your views of things. He laughed when he heard I had sent a letter to you, and he ran off (dear fellow!) to see you on my behalf. You must have met him, if you had come here by the village."

On getting back to the rectory, I questioned Zillah. Nugent, in my absence, had run up into the sitting-room; had waited there a few minutes alone, on the chance of my return; had got tired of waiting, and had gone away again. I inquired about Lucilla next. A few minutes after Nugent had gone, she had left her room, and she too had asked for me. Hearing that I was not to be found in the house, she had given Zillah a letter to post--and had then returned to her bed-chamber.

I happened to be standing by the hearth, looking into the dying fire, while the nurse was speaking. Not a vestige of Oscar's letter to me (as I now well remember) was to be seen. In my position, the plain conclusion was that I had really done what I supposed myself to have done--that is to say, thrown the letter into the flames.

Entering Lucilla's room, soon afterwards, to make my apologies for having

forgotten to wait and take her letter to the post, I found her, weary enough after the events of the day, getting ready for bed.

"I don't wonder at your being tired of waiting for me," she said. "Writing is long, long work for me. But this was a letter which I felt bound to write myself, if I could. Can you guess who I am corresponding with? It is done, my dear! I have written to Herr Grosse!"

"Already!"

"What is there to wait for? What is there left to determine on? I have told Herr Grosse that our family consultation is over, and that I am entirely at his disposal for any length of time he may think right. And I warn him, if he attempts to put it off, that he will be only forcing on me the inconvenience of going to him in London. I have expressed that part of my letter strongly--I can tell you! He will get it to-morrow, by the afternoon post. And the next day--if he is a man of his word--he will be here."

"Oh, Lucilla! not to operate on your eyes?"

"Yes--to operate on my eyes!"