## CHAPTER THE THIRTY-THIRD

The Day Between

THE interval-day before the second appearance of Herr Grosse, and the experiment on Lucilla's sight that was to follow it, was marked by two incidents which ought to be noticed in this place.

The first incident was the arrival, early in the morning, of another letter addressed to me privately by Oscar Dubourg. Like many other shy people, he had a perfect mania, where any embarrassing circumstances were concerned, for explaining himself, with difficulty, by means of his pen, in preference to explaining himself, with ease, by means of his tongue.

Oscar's present communication informed me that he had left us for London by the first morning train, and that his object in taking this sudden journey was--to state his present position towards Lucilla to a gentleman especially conversant with the peculiarities of blind people. In plain words, he had resolved on applying to Mr. Sebright for advice.

"I like Mr. Sebright" (Oscar wrote) "as cordially as I detest Herr Grosse. The short conversation I had with him has left me with the pleasantest impression of his delicacy and his kindness. If I freely reveal to this skillful surgeon the sad situation in which I am placed, I believe his experience will throw an entirely new light on the present state of Lucilla's mind, and on the changes which we may expect to see produced in her, if she really does recover her sight. The result may be of incalculable benefit in teaching me how I may own the truth, most harmlessly to her, as well as to myself. Pray don't suppose I undervalue your advice. I only want to be doubly fortified, before I risk my confession, by the advice of a scientific man."

All this I took to mean, in plain English, that vacillating Oscar wanted to quiet his conscience by gaining time, and that his absurd idea of consulting Mr. Sebright was nothing less than a new and plausible excuse for putting off the evil day. His letter ended by pledging me to secrecy, and by entreating me so to manage matters as to grant him a private interview on his return to Dimchurch by the evening train.

I confess I felt some curiosity as to what would come of the proposed consultation between unready Oscar and precise Mr. Sebright--and I accordingly arranged to take my walk alone, towards eight o'clock that

evening, on the road that led to the distant railway station.

The second incident of the day may be described as a confidential conversation between Lucilla and myself, on the subject which now equally absorbed us both--the momentous subject of her restoration to the blessing of sight.

She joined me at the breakfast-table with her ready distrust newly excited, poor thing, by Oscar. He had accounted to her for his journey to London by putting forward the commonplace excuse of "business." She instantly suspected (knowing how he felt about it) that he was secretly bent on interfering with the performance of the operation by Herr Grosse. I contrived to compose the anxiety thus aroused in her mind, by informing her, on Oscar's own authority, that he personally disliked and distrusted the German oculist. "Make your mind easy," I said. "I answer for his not venturing near Herr Grosse."

A long silence between us followed those words. When Lucilla next referred to Oscar in connection with the coming operation, the depressed state of her spirits seemed to have quite altered her view of her own prospects. She, of all the people in the world, now spoke in disparagement of the blessing conferred on the blind by the recovery of their sight!

"Do you know one thing?" she said. "If I had not been going to be married to Oscar, I doubt if I should have cared to put any oculist, native or foreign, to the trouble of coming to Dimchurch."

"I don't think I understand you," I answered. "You cannot surely mean to say that you would not have been glad, under any circumstances, to recover your sight?"

"That is just what I do mean to say."

"What! you, who have written to Grosse to hurry the operation, don't care to see?"

"I only care to see Oscar. And, what is more, I only care to see him because I am in love with him. But for that, I really don't feel as if it would give me any particular pleasure to use my eyes. I have been blind so long, I have learnt to do without them."

"And yet, you looked perfectly entranced when Nugent first set you doubting whether you were blind for life?"

"Nugent took me by surprise," she answered; "Nugent startled me out of my senses. I have had time to think since; I am not carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment now. You people who can see attach such an absurd importance to your eyes! I set my touch, my dear, against your eyes, as much the most trustworthy, and much the most intelligent sense of the two. If Oscar was not, as I have said, the uppermost feeling with me, shall I tell you what I should have infinitely preferred to recovering my sight--supposing it could have been done?" She shook her head with a comic resignation to circumstances. "Unfortunately, it can't be done!"

"What can't be done?"

She suddenly held out both her arms over the breakfast-table.

"The stretching out of these to an enormous and unheard-of length. That is what I should have liked!" she answered. "I could find out better what was going on at a distance with my hands, than you could with your eyes and your telescopes. What doubts I might set at rest for instance about the planetary system, among the people who can see, if I could only stretch out far enough to touch the stars."

"This is talking sheer nonsense, Lucilla!"

"Is it? Just tell me which knows best in the dark--my touch or your eyes? Who has got a sense that she can always trust to serve her equally well through the whole four-and-twenty hours? You or me? But for Oscar--to speak in sober earnest, this time--I tell you I would much rather perfect the sense in me that I have already got, than have a sense given to me that I have not got. Until I knew Oscar, I don't think I ever honestly envied any of you the use of your eyes."

"You astonish me, Lucilla!"

She rattled her teaspoon impatiently in her empty cup.

"Can you always trust your eyes, even in broad daylight?" she burst out. "How often do they deceive you, in the simplest things? What did I hear you all disputing about the other day in the garden? You were looking at some view?"

"Yes--at the view down the alley of trees at the other end of the churchyard wall."

"Some object in the alley had attracted general notice--had it not?"

"Yes--an object at the further end of it."

"I heard you up here. You all differed in opinion, in spite of your wonderful eyes. My father said it moved. You said it stood still. Oscar said it was a man. Mrs. Finch said it was a calf. Nugent ran off, and examined this amazing object at close quarters. And what did it turn out to be? A stump of an old tree blown across the road in the night! Why am I to envy people the possession of a sense which plays them such tricks as that? No! no! Herr Grosse is going to 'cut into my cataracts,' as he calls it--because I am going to be married to a man I love; and I fancy, like a fool, I may love him better still, if I can see him. I may be quite wrong," she added archly. "It may end in my not loving him half as well as I do now!"

I thought of Oscar's face, and felt a sickening fear that she might be speaking far more seriously than she suspected. I tried to change the subject. No! Her imaginative nature had found its way into a new region of speculation before I could open my lips.

"I associate light," she said thoughtfully, "with all that is beautiful and heavenly--and dark with all that is vile and horrible and devilish. I wonder how light and dark will look to me when I see?"

"I believe they will astonish you," I answered, "by being entirely unlike what you fancy them to be now."

She started. I had alarmed her without intending it.

"Will Oscar's face be utterly unlike what I fancy it to be now?" she asked, in suddenly altered tones. "Do you mean to say that I have not had the right image of him in my mind all this time?"

I tried again to draw her off to another topic. What more could I do--with my tongue tied by the German's warning to us not to agitate her, in the face of the operation to be performed on the next day?

It was quite useless. She went on, as before, without heeding me.

"Have I no means of judging rightly what Oscar is like?" she said. "I touch

my own face; I know how long it is and how broad it is; I know how big the different features are, and where they are. And then I touch Oscar, and compare his face with my knowledge of my own face. Not a single detail escapes me. I see him in my mind as plainly as you see me across this table. Do you mean to say, when I see him with my eyes, that I shall discover something perfectly new to me? I don't believe it!" She started up impatiently, and took a turn in the room. "Oh!" she exclaimed, with a stamp of her foot, "why can't I take laudanum enough, or chloroform enough to kill me for the next six weeks--and then come to life again when the German takes the bandage off my eyes!" She sat down once more, and drifted all on a sudden into a question of pure morality. "Tell me this," she said. "Is the greatest virtue, the virtue which it is most difficult to practice?"

"I suppose so," I answered.

She drummed with both hands on the table, petulantly, viciously, as hard as she could.

"Then, Madame Pratolungo," she said, "the greatest of all the virtues is--Patience. Oh, my friend, how I hate the greatest of all the virtues at this moment!"

That ended it--there the conversation found its way into other topics at last.

Thinking afterwards of the new side of her mind which Lucilla had shown to me, I derived one consolation from what had passed at the breakfast-table. If Mr. Sebright proved to be right, and if the operation failed after all, I had Lucilla's word for it that blindness, of itself, is not the terrible affliction to the blind which the rest of us fancy it to be--because we can see.

Towards half-past seven in the evening, I went out alone, as I had planned, to meet Oscar on his return from London.

At a long straight stretch of the road, I saw him advancing towards me. He was walking more rapidly than usual, and singing as he walked. Even through its livid discoloration, the poor fellow's face looked radiant with happiness as he came nearer. He waved his walking-stick exultingly in the air. "Good news!" he called out at the top of his voice. "Mr. Sebright has made me a happy man again!" I had never before seen him so like Nugent in manner, as I now saw him when we met and he shook hands with me.

"Tell me all about it," I said.

He gave me his arm; and, talking all the way, we walked back slowly to Dimchurch.

"In the first place," he began, "Mr. Sebright holds to his own opinion more firmly than ever. He feels absolutely certain that the operation will fail."

"Is that your good news?" I asked reproachfully.

"No," he said. "Though, mind, I own to my shame there was a time when I almost hoped it would fail. Mr. Sebright has put me in a better frame of mind. I have little or nothing to dread from the success of the operation--if, by any extraordinary chance, it should succeed. I remind you of Mr. Sebright's opinion merely to give you a right idea of the tone which he took with me at starting. He only consented under protest to contemplate the event which Lucilla and Herr Grosse consider to be a certainty. 'If the statement of your position requires it,' he said, 'I will admit that it is barely possible she may be able to see you two months hence. Now begin.' I began by informing him of my marriage engagement."

"Shall I tell you how Mr. Sebright received the information?" I said. "He held his tongue, and made you a bow."

Oscar laughed.

"Quite true!" he answered. "I told him next of Lucilla's extraordinary antipathy to dark people, and dark shades of color of all kinds. Can you guess what he said to me when I had done?"

I owned that my observation of Mr. Sebright's character did not extend to guessing that.

"He said it was a common antipathy in his experience of the blind. It was one among the many strange influences exercised by blindness on the mind. 'The physical affliction has its mysterious moral influence,' he said. 'We can observe it, but we can't explain it. The special antipathy which you mention, is an incurable antipathy, except on one condition--the recovery of the sight.' There he stopped. I entreated him to go on. No! He declined to go on until I had finished what I had to say to him first. I had my confession still to make to him--and I made it."

"You concealed nothing?"

"Nothing. I laid my weakness bare before him. I told him that Lucilla was

still firmly convinced that Nugent's was the discolored face, instead of mine. And then I put the question--What am I to do?"

"And how did he reply?"

"In these words:--'If you ask me what you are to do, in the event of her remaining blind (which I tell you again will be the event), I decline to advise you. Your own conscience and your own sense of honor must decide the question. On the other hand, if you ask me what you are to do, in the event of her recovering her sight, I can answer you unreservedly in the plainest terms. Leave things as they are; and wait till she sees.' Those were his own words. Oh, the load that they took off my mind! I made him repeat them--I declare I was almost afraid to trust the evidence of my own ears."

I understood the motive of Oscar's good spirits, better than I understood the motive of Mr. Sebright's advice. "Did he give his reasons?" I asked.

"You shall hear his reasons directly. He insisted on first satisfying himself that I thoroughly understood my position at that moment. 'The prime condition of success, as Herr Grosse has told you,' he said, 'is the perfect tranquillity of the patient. If you make your confession to the young lady when you get back to-night to Dimchurch, you throw her into a state of excitement which will render it impossible for my German colleague to operate on her to-morrow. If you defer your confession, the medical necessities of the case force you to be silent, until the professional attendance of the oculist has ceased. There is your position! My advice to you is to adopt the last alternative. Wait (and make the other persons in the secret wait) until the result of the operation has declared itself.' There I stopped him. 'Do you mean that I am to be present, on the first occasion when she is able to use her eyes?' I asked. 'Am I to let her see me, without a word beforehand to prepare her for the color of my face?'"

We were now getting to the interesting part of it. You English people, when you are out walking and are carrying on a conversation with a friend, never come to a standstill at the points of interest. We foreigners, on the other hand, invariably stop. I surprised Oscar by suddenly pulling him up in the middle of the road.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Go on!" I said impatiently.

"I can't go on," he rejoined. "You're holding me."

I held him tighter than ever, and ordered him more resolutely than ever to go on. Oscar resigned himself to a halt (foreign fashion) on the high road.

"Mr. Sebright met my question by putting a question on his side," he resumed. "He asked me how I proposed to prepare her for the color of my face."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I said I had planned to make an excuse for leaving Dimchurch--and, once away, to prepare her, by writing, for what she might expect to see when I returned."

"What did he say to that?"

"He wouldn't hear of it. He said, 'I strongly recommend you to be present on the first occasion when she is capable (if she ever is capable) of using her sight. I attach the greatest importance to her being able to correct the hideous and absurd image now in her mind of a face like yours, by seeing you as you really are at the earliest available opportunity.'"

We were just walking on again, when certain words in that last sentence startled me. I stopped short once more.

"Hideous and absurd image?" I repeated, thinking instantly of my conversation of that morning with Lucilla. "What did Mr. Sebright mean by using such language as that?"

"Just what I asked him. His reply will interest you. It led him into that explanation of his motives which you inquired for just now. Shall we walk on?"

My petrified foreign feet recovered their activity. We went on again.

"When I had spoken to Mr. Sebright of Lucilla's inveterate prejudice," Oscar continued, "he had surprised me by saying that it was common in his experience, and was only curable by her restoration to sight. In support of those assertions, he now told me of two interesting cases which had occurred in his professional practice. The first was the case of the little daughter of an Indian officer--blind from infancy like Lucilla. After operating successfully, the time came when he could permit his patient to try her sight--that is to say, to try if she could see sufficiently well at first, to

distinguish dark objects from light. Among the members of the household assembled to witness the removal of the bandage, was an Indian nurse who had accompanied the family to England. The first person the child saw was her mother--a fair woman. She clasped her little hands in astonishment, and that was all. At the next turn of her head, she saw the dark Indian nurse and instantly screamed with terror. Mr. Sebright owned to me that he could not explain it. The child could have no possible association with colors. Yet there nevertheless was the most violent hatred and horror of a dark object (the hatred and horror peculiar to the blind) expressing itself unmistakably in a child of ten years old! My first thought, while he was telling me this, was of myself, and of my chance with Lucilla. My first question was, 'Did the child get used to the nurse?' I can give you his answer in his own words. 'In a week's time, I found the child sitting in the nurse's lap as composedly as I am sitting in this chair.'--"That is encouraging--isn't it?"

"Most encouraging--nobody can deny it."

"The second instance was more curious still. This time the case was the case of a grown man--and the object was to show me what strange fantastic images (utterly unlike the reality) the blind form of the people about them. The patient was married, and was to see his wife (as Lucilla is one day to see me) for the first time. He had been told, before he married her, that she was personally disfigured by the scar of a wound on one of her cheeks. The poor woman--ah, how well I can understand her!--trembled for the consequences. The man who had loved her dearly while he was blind, might hate her when he saw her scarred face. Her husband had been the first to console her when the operation was determined on. He declared that his sense of touch, and the descriptions given to him by others, had enabled him to form, in his own mind, the most complete and faithful image of his wife's face. Nothing that Mr. Sebright could say would induce him to believe that it was physically impossible for him to form a really correct idea of any object, animate or inanimate, which he had never seen. He wouldn't hear of it. He was so certain of the result, that he held his wife's hand in his, to encourage her, when the bandage was removed from him. At his first look at her, he uttered a cry of horror, and fell back in his chair in a swoon. His wife, poor thing, was distracted. Mr. Sebright did his best to compose her, and waited till her husband was able to answer the questions put to him. It then appeared that his blind idea of his wife, and of her disfigurement had been something so grotesquely and horribly unlike the reality, that it was hard to know whether to laugh or to tremble at it. She was as beautiful as an angel, by comparison with her husband's favorite idea of her--and yet, because it was his idea, he was absolutely disgusted and terrified at the first sight of

her! In a few weeks he was able to compare his wife with other women, to look at pictures, to understand what beauty was and what ugliness was--and from that time they have lived together as happy a married couple as any in the kingdom."

I was not quite sure which way this last example pointed. It alarmed me when I thought of Lucilla. I came to a standstill again.

"How did Mr. Sebright apply this second case to Lucilla and to you?" I asked.

"You shall hear," said Oscar. "He first appealed to the case as supporting his assertion that Lucilla's idea of me must be utterly unlike what I am myself. He asked if I was now satisfied that she could have no correct conception of what faces and colors were really like? and if I agreed with him in believing that the image in her mind of the man with the blue face, was in all probability something fantastically and hideously unlike the reality? After what I had heard, I agreed with him as a matter of course. 'Very well,' says Mr. Sebright. 'Now let its remember that there is one important difference between the case of Miss Finch, and the case that I have just mentioned. The husband's blind idea of his wife was the husband's favorite idea. The shock of the first sight of her, was plainly a shock to him on that account. Now Miss Finch's blind idea of the blue face is, on the contrary, a hateful idea to her--the image is an image that she loathes. Is it not fair to conclude from this, that the first sight of you as you really are, is likely to be, in her case, a relief to her instead of a shock? Reasoning from my experience, I reach that conclusion; and I advise you, in your own interests, to be present when the bandage is taken off. Even if I prove to be mistaken--even if she is not immediately reconciled to the sight of you--there is the other example of the child and the Indian nurse to satisfy you that it is only a question of time. Sooner or later, she will take the discovery as any other young lady would take it. At first, she will be indignant with you for deceiving her; and then, if you are sure of your place in her affections, she will end in forgiving you.--There is my view of your position, and there are the grounds on which I form it! In the meantime, my own opinion remains unshaken. I firmly believe that you will never have occasion to act on the advice that I have given to you. When the bandage is taken off, the chances are five hundred to one that she is no nearer to seeing you then than she is now.' These were his last words--and on that we parted."

Oscar and I walked on again for a little way, in silence.

I had nothing to say against Mr. Sebright's reasons; it was impossible to

question the professional experience from which they were drawn. As to blind people in general, I felt no doubt that his advice was good, and that his conclusions were arrived at correctly. But Lucilla's was no ordinary character. My experience of her was better experience than Mr. Sebright's--and the more I thought of the future, the less inclined I felt to share Oscar's hopeful view. She was just the person to say something or do something, at the critical moment of the experiment, which would take the wisest previous calculation by surprise. Oscar's prospects never had looked darker to me than they looked at that moment.

It would have been useless and cruel to have said to him what I have just said here. I put as bright a face on it as I could, and asked if he proposed to follow Mr. Sebright's advice.

"Yes," he said. "With a certain reservation of my own, which occurred to me after I had left his house."

"May I ask what it is?"

"Certainly. I mean to beg Nugent to leave Dimchurch, before Lucilla tries her sight for the first time. He will do that, I know, to please me."

"And when he has done it, what then?"

"Then I mean to be present--as Mr. Sebright suggested--when the bandage is taken off."

"Previously telling Lucilla," I interposed, "that it is you who are in the room?"

"No. There I take the precaution that I alluded to just now. I propose to leave Lucilla under the impression that it is I who have left Dimchurch, and that Nugent's face is the face she sees. If Mr. Sebright proves to be right, and if her first sensation is a sensation of relief, I will own the truth to her the same day. If not, I will wait to make my confession until she has become reconciled to the sight of me. That plan meets every possible emergency. It is one of the few good ideas that my stupid head has hit on since I have been at Dimchurch."

He said those last words with such an innocent air of triumph, that I really could not find it in my heart to damp his ardor by telling him what I thought of his idea. All I said was, "Don't forget, Oscar, that the cleverest plans are at the mercy of circumstances. At the last moment, an accident may happen which will force you to speak out."

We came in sight of the rectory as I gave him that final warning. Nugent was strolling up and down the road on the look-out for us. I left Oscar to tell his story over again to his brother, and went into the house.

Lucilla was at her piano when I entered the sitting-room. She was not only playing--but (a rare thing with her) singing too. The song was, poetry and music both, of her own composing. "I shall see him! I shall see him!" In those four words the composition began and ended. She adapted them to all the happy melodies in her memory. She accompanied them with hands that seemed to be mad for joy--hands that threatened every moment to snap the chords of the instrument. Never, since my first day at the rectory, had I heard such a noise in our quiet sitting-room as I heard now. She was in a fever of exhilaration which, in my foreboding frame of mind at that moment, it pained and shocked me to see. I lifted her off the music-stool, and shut up the piano by main force.

"Compose yourself for heaven's sake," I said. "Do you want to be completely exhausted when the German comes tomorrow?"

That consideration instantly checked her. She suddenly became quiet, with the abrupt facility of a child.

"I forgot that," she said, sitting down in a corner, with a face of dismay. "He might refuse to perform the operation! Oh, my dear, quiet me down somehow. Get a book, and read to me."

I got the book. Ah, the poor author! Neither she nor I paid the slightest attention to him. Worse still, we abused him for not interesting us--and then shut him up with a bang, and pushed him rudely into his place on the book-shelf, and left him upside down and went to bed.

She was standing at her window when I went in to wish her good night. The mellow moonlight fell tenderly on her lovely face.

"Moon that I have never seen," she murmured softly, "I feel you looking at me! Is the time coming when I shall look at You?" She turned from the window, and eagerly put my fingers on her pulse. "Am I quite composed again?" she asked. "Will he find me well to-morrow? Feel it! feel it! Is it quiet now?"

I felt it--throbbing faster and faster.

"Sleep will quiet it," I said--and kissed her, and left her.

She slept well. As for me, I passed such a wretched night, and got up so completely worn out, that I had to go back to my room after breakfast, and lie down again. Lucilla persuaded me to do it. "Herr Grosse won't be here till the afternoon," she said. "Rest till he comes."

We had reckoned without allowing for the eccentric character of our German surgeon. Excepting the business of his profession, Herr Grosse did everything by impulse, and nothing by rule. I had not long fallen into a broken unrefreshing sleep, when I felt Zillah's hand on my shoulder, and heard Zillah's voice in my ear.

"Please to get up, ma'am! He's here--he has come from London by the morning train."

I hurried into the sitting-room.

There, at the table, sat Herr Grosse with an open instrument-case before him; his wild black eyes gloating over a hideous array of scissors, probes, and knives, and his shabby hat hard by with lint and bandages huddled together anyhow inside it. And there stood Lucilla by his side, stooping over him--with one hand laid familiarly on his shoulder, and with the other deftly fingering one of his horrid instruments to find out what it was like!

THE END OF THE FIRST PART

PART THE SECOND