

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-FOUR

Nugent shows his Hand

I CLOSED the First Part of my narrative on the day of the operation, the twenty-fifth of June.

I open the Second Part, between six and seven weeks later, on the ninth of August.

How did the time pass at Dimchurch in that interval?

Searching backwards in my memory, I call to life again the domestic history of the six weeks. It looks, on retrospection, miserably dull and empty of incident. I wonder when I contemplate it now, how we got through that weary interval--how we bore that forced inaction, that unrelieved oppression of suspense.

Changing from bed-room to sitting-room, from sitting-room back to bed-room; with the daylight always shut out; with the bandages always on, except when the surgeon looked at her eyes; Lucilla bore the imprisonment--and worse than the imprisonment, the uncertainty--of her period of probation, with the courage that can endure anything, the courage sustained by Hope. With books, with music, with talk--above all, with Love to help her--she counted her way calmly through the dull succession of hours and days till the time came which was to decide the question in dispute between the oculists--the terrible question of which of the two, Mr. Sebright or Herr Grosse, was right.

I was not present at the examination which finally decided all doubt. I joined Oscar in the garden--quite as incapable as he was of exerting the slightest self-control. We paced silently backwards and forwards on the lawn, like two animals in a cage. Zillah was the only witness present when the German examined our poor darling's eyes; Nugent engaging to wait in the next room and announce the result from the window. As the event turned out, Herr Grosse was beforehand with him. Once more we heard his broken English shouting, "Hi-hi-hoi! hoi-hi! hoi-hi!" Once more, we beheld his huge silk handkerchief waving at the window. I turned sick and faint under the excitement of the moment--under the rapture (it was nothing less) of hearing

those three electrifying words: "She will see!" Mercy! how we did abuse Mr. Sebright, when we were all reunited again in Lucilla's room!

The first excitement over, we had our difficulties to contend with next.

From the moment when she was positively informed that the operation had succeeded, our once-patient Lucilla developed into a new being. She now rose in perpetual revolt against the caution which still deferred the day on which she was to be allowed to make the first trial of her sight. It required all my influence, backed by Oscar's entreaties, and strengthened by the furious foreign English of our excellent German surgeon (Herr Grosse had a temper of his own, I can tell you!) to prevent her from breaking through the medical discipline which held her in its grasp. When she became quite unmanageable, and vehemently abused him to his face, our good Grosse used to swear at her, in a compound bad language of his own, with a tremendous aspiration at the beginning of it, which always set matters right by making her laugh. I see him again as I write, leaving the room on these occasions, with his eyes blazing through his spectacles, and his shabby hat cocked sideways on his head. "Soh, you little-spitfire-Feench! If you touch that bandages when I have put him on--Ho-Damn-Damn! I say no more. Good-bye!"

From Lucilla I turn to the twin-brothers next.

Tranquilized as to the future, after his interview with Mr. Sebright, Oscar presented himself at his best during the time of which I am now writing. Lucilla's main reliance in her days in the darkened room, was on what her lover could do to relieve and to encourage her. He never once failed her; his patience was perfect; his devotion was inexhaustible. It is sad to say so, in view of what happened afterwards; but I only tell a necessary truth when I declare that he immensely strengthened his hold on her affections, in those last days of her blindness when his society was most precious to her. Ah, how fervently she used to talk of him when she and I were left together at night! Forgive me if I leave this part of the history of the courtship untold. I don't like to write of it--I don't like to think of it. Let us get on to something else.

Nugent comes next. I would give a great deal, poor as I am, to be able to leave him out. It is not to be done. I must write about that lost wretch, and you must read about him, whether we like it or not.

The days of Lucilla's imprisonment, were also the days when my favorite disappointed me, for the first time. He and his brother seemed to change

places. It was Nugent now who appeared to disadvantage by comparison with Oscar. He surprised and grieved his brother by leaving Browndown. "All I can do for you, I have done," he said. "I can be of no further use for the present to anybody. Let me go. I am stagnating in this miserable place--I must, and will, have change." Oscar's entreaties, in Nugent's present frame of mind, failed to move him. Away he went one morning, without bidding anybody goodbye. He had talked of being absent for a week--he remained away for a month. We heard of him, leading a wild life, among a vicious set of men. It was reported that a frantic restlessness possessed him which nobody could understand. He came back as suddenly as he had left us. His variable nature had swung round, in the interval, to the opposite extreme. He was full of repentance for his reckless conduct; he was in a state of depression which defied rousing; he despaired of himself and his future. Sometimes he talked of going back to America; and sometimes he threatened to close his career by enlisting as a private soldier. Would any other person, in my place, have seen which way these signs pointed? I doubt it, if that person's mind had been absorbed, as mine was, in watching Lucilla day by day. Even if I had been a suspicious woman by nature--which, thank God, I am not--my distrust must have lain dormant, in the all-subduing atmosphere of suspense hanging heavily on me morning, noon, and night in the darkened room.

So much, briefly, for the sayings and doings of the persons principally concerned in this narrative, during the six weeks which separate Part the First from Part the Second.

I begin again on the ninth of August.

This was the memorable day chosen by Herr Grosse for risking the experiment of removing the bandage, and permitting Lucilla to try her sight for the first time. Conceive for yourselves (don't ask me to describe) the excitement that raged in our obscure little circle, now that we were standing face to face with that grand Event in our lives which I promised to relate in the opening sentence of these pages.

I was the earliest riser at the rectory that morning. My excitable French blood was in a fever. I was irresistibly reminded of myself, at a time long past--the time when my glorious Pratulungo and I, succumbing to Fate and tyrants, fled to England for safety; martyrs to that ungrateful Republic (long live the Republic!) for which I laid down my money and my husband his life.

I opened my window, and hailed the good omen of sunrise in a clear sky. Just as I was turning away again from the view, I saw a figure steal out from

the shrubbery and appear on the lawn. The figure came nearer. I recognized Oscar.

"What in the world are you doing there, at this time in the morning?" I called out.

He lifted his finger to his lips, and came close under my window before he answered.

"Hush!" he said. "Don't let Lucilla hear you. Come down to me as soon as you can. I am waiting to speak to you."

When I joined him in the garden, I saw directly that something had gone wrong.

"Bad news from Browndown?" I asked.

"Nugent has disappointed me," he answered. "Do you remember the evening when you met me after my consultation with Mr. Sebright?"

"Perfectly."

"I told you that I meant to ask Nugent to leave Dimchurch, on the day when Lucilla tried her sight for the first time."

"Well?"

"Well--he refuses to leave Dimchurch."

"Have you explained your motives to him?"

"Carefully--before I asked him to go. I told him how impossible it was to say what might happen. I reminded him that it might be of the utmost importance to me to preserve the impression now in Lucilla's mind--for a certain time only--after Lucilla could see. I promised, the moment she became reconciled to the sight of me, to recall him, and in his presence to tell her the truth. All that I said to him--and how do you think he answered me?"

"Did he positively refuse?"

"No. He walked away from me to the window, and considered a little. Then he turned round suddenly and said 'What did you tell me was Mr. Sebright's

opinion? Mr. Sebright thought she would be relieved instead of being terrified. In that case, what need is there for me to go away? You can acknowledge at once that she has seen your face, and not mine?' He put his hands in his pockets when he had said that (you know Nugent's downright way)--and turned back to the window as if he had settled everything."

"What did you say, on your side?"

"I said, 'Suppose Mr. Sebright is wrong?' He only answered, 'Suppose Mr. Sebright is right?' I followed him to the window--I never heard him speak so sourly to me as he spoke at that moment. 'What is your objection to going away for a day or two?' I asked. 'My objection is soon stated,' he answered. 'I am sick of these everlasting complications. It is useless and cruel to carry on the deception any longer. Mr. Sebright's advice is the wise advice and the right advice. Let her see you as you are.' With that answer, he walked out of the room. Something has upset him--I can't imagine what it is. Do pray see what you can make of him! My only hope is in you."

I own I felt reluctant to interfere. Suddenly and strangely as Nugent had altered his point of view, it seemed to me undeniable that Nugent was right. At the same time, Oscar looked so disappointed and distressed, that it was really impossible, on that day above all others, to pain him additionally by roundly saying No. I undertook to do what I could--and I inwardly hoped that circumstances would absolve me from the necessity of doing anything at all.

Circumstances failed to justify my selfish confidence in them.

I was out in the village, after breakfast, on a domestic errand connected with the necessary culinary preparations for the reception of Herr Grosse--when I heard my name pronounced behind me, and, turning round, found myself face to face with Nugent.

"Has my brother been bothering you this morning," he asked, "before I was up?"

I instantly noticed a return in him, as he said that, to the same dogged ungracious manner which had perplexed and displeased me at my last confidential interview with him in the rectory garden.

"Oscar has been speaking to me this morning," I replied.

"About me?"

"About you. You have distressed and disappointed him----"

"I know! I know! Oscar is worse than a child. I am beginning to lose all patience with him."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, Nugent. You have borne with him so kindly thus far--surely you can make allowances for him to-day? His whole future may depend on what happens in Lucilla's sitting-room a few hours hence."

"He is making a mountain out of a mole-hill--and so are you."

Those words were spoken bitterly--almost rudely. I answered sharply on my side.

"You are the last person living who has any right to say that. Oscar is in a false position towards Lucilla, with your knowledge and consent. In your brother's interests, you agreed to the fraud that has been practiced on her. In your brother's interests, again, you are asked to leave Dimchurch. Why do you refuse?"

"I refuse, because I have come round to your way of thinking. What did you say of Oscar and of me, in the summer-house? You said we were taking a cruel advantage of Lucilla's blindness. You were right. It was cruel not to have told her the truth. I won't be a party to concealing the truth from her any longer! I refuse to persist in deceiving her--in meanly deceiving her--on the day when she recovers her sight!"

It is entirely beyond my power to describe the tone in which he made that reply. I can only declare that it struck me dumb for the moment. I drew a step nearer to him. With vague misgivings in me, I looked him searchingly in the face. He looked back at me, without shrinking.

"Well?" he asked--with a hard smile which defied me to put him in the wrong.

I could discover nothing in his face--I could only follow my instincts as a woman. Those instincts warned me to accept his explanation.

"I am to understand then that you have decided on staying here?" I said.

"Certainly!"

"What do you propose to do, when Herr Grosse arrives, and we assemble in Lucilla's room?"

"I propose to be present among the rest of you, at the most interesting moment of Lucilla's life."

"No! you don't propose that!"

"I do!"

"You have forgotten something, Mr. Nugent Dubourg."

"What is it, Madame Pratolungo?"

"You have forgotten that Lucilla believes the brother with the discolored face to be You, and the brother with the fair complexion to be Oscar. You have forgotten that the surgeon has expressly forbidden us to agitate her by entering into any explanations before he allows her to use her eyes. You have forgotten that the very deception which you have just positively refused to go on with, will be nevertheless a deception continued, if you are present when Lucilla sees. Your own resolution pledges you not to enter the rectory doors until Lucilla has discovered the truth." In those words I closed the vice on him. I had got Mr. Nugent Dubourg!

He turned deadly pale. His eyes dropped before mine for the first time.

"Thank you for reminding me," he said. "I had forgotten."

He pronounced those submissive words in a suddenly-lowered voice. Something in his tone, or something in the dropping of his eyes, set my heart beating quickly, with a certain vague expectation which I was unable to realize to myself.

"You agree with me," I said, "that you cannot be one amongst us at the rectory? What will you do?"

"I will remain at Browndown," he answered.

I felt he was lying. Don't ask for my reasons: I have no reasons to give. When he said "I will remain at Browndown," I felt he was lying.

"Why not do what Oscar asks of you?" I went on. "If you are absent, you may as well be in one place as in another. There is plenty of time still to leave

Dimchurch."

He looked up as suddenly as he had looked down.

"Do you and Oscar think me a stock or a stone?" he burst out angrily.

"What do you mean?"

"Who are you indebted to for what is going to happen to-day?" he went on, more and more passionately. "You are indebted to Me. Who among you all stood alone in refusing to believe that she was blind for life? I did! Who brought the man here who has given her back her sight? I brought the man! And I am the one person who is to be left in ignorance of how it ends. The others are to be present: I am to be sent away. The others are to see it: I am to hear by post (if any of you think of writing to me) what she does, what she says, how she looks, at the first heavenly moment when she opens her eyes on the world." He flung up his hand in the air, and burst out savagely with a bitter laugh. "I astonish you, don't I? I am claiming a position which I have no right to occupy. What interest can I feel in it? Oh God! what do I care about the woman to whom I have given a new life?" His voice broke into a sob at those last wild words. He tore at the breast of his coat as if he was suffocating--and turned, and left me.

I stood rooted to the spot. In one breathless instant, the truth broke on me like a revelation. At last I had penetrated the terrible secret. Nugent loved her.

My first impulse, when I recovered myself, hurried me at the top of my speed back to the rectory. For a moment or two, I think I must really have lost my senses. I felt a frantic suspicion that he had gone into the house, and that he was making his way to Lucilla at that moment. When I found that all was quiet--when Zillah had satisfied me that no visitor had come near our side of the rectory--I calmed down a little, and went back to the garden to compose myself before I ventured into Lucilla's presence.

After awhile, I got over the first horror of it, and saw my own position plainly. There was not a living soul at Dimchurch in whom I could confide. Come what might of it, in this dreadful emergency, I must trust in myself alone.

I had just arrived at that startling conclusion; I had shed some bitter tears when I remembered how hardly I had judged poor Oscar on more than one occasion; I had decided that my favorite Nugent was the most hateful villain

living, and that I would leave nothing undone that the craft of a woman could compass to drive him out of the place--when I was forced back to present necessities by the sound of Zillah's voice calling to me from the house. I went to her directly. The nurse had a message for me from her young mistress. My poor Lucilla was lonely and anxious: she was surprised at my leaving her, she insisted on seeing me immediately.

I took my first precaution against a surprise from Nugent, as I crossed the threshold of the door.

"Our dear child must not be disturbed by visitors to-day," I said to Zillah. "If Mr. Nugent Dubourg comes here and asks for her--don't tell Lucilla; tell me."

This said, I went up-stairs, and joined my darling in the darkened room.