

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SIXTH

The Brothers Meet

A FAINT sound of crying found its way to my ears from the lower end of the room, and reminded me that the rector and his wife had been present among us. Feeble Mrs. Finch was lying back in her chair, weeping and wailing over what had happened. Her husband, with the baby in his arms, was trying to compose her. I ought perhaps to have offered my help--but, I own, poor Mrs. Finch's distress produced only a passing impression on me. My whole heart was with another person. I forgot the rector and his wife, and went back to Oscar.

This time he moved--he lifted his head when he saw me. Shall I ever forget the silent misery in that face, the dull dreadful stare in those tearless eyes?

I took his hand--I felt for the poor disfigured, rejected man as his mother might have felt for him--I gave him a mother's kiss. "Be comforted, Oscar," I said. "Trust me to set this right."

He drew a long trembling breath, and pressed my hand gratefully. I attempted to speak to him again--he stopped me by looking suddenly towards the door.

"Is Nugent outside?" he asked in a whisper.

I went into the corridor. It was empty. I looked into Lucilla's room. She and Grosse and the nurse were the only persons in it. I beckoned to Zillah to come out and speak to me. I asked for Nugent. He had left Lucilla abruptly at the bed-room door--he was out of the house. I inquired if it was known in what direction he had gone. Zillah had seen him in the field at the end of the garden, walking away rapidly, with his back to the village, and his face to the hills.

"Nugent has gone," I said, returning to Oscar.

"Add to your kindness to me," he answered. "Let me go too."

A quick fear crossed my mind, that he might be bent on following his brother.

"Wait a little," I said, "and rest here."

He shook his head.

"I must be by myself," he said. After considering a little, he added a question. "Has Nugent gone to Browndown?"

"No. Nugent has been seen walking towards the hills."

He took my hand again. "Be merciful to me," he said. "Let me go."

"Home? To Browndown?"

"Yes."

"Let me go with you."

He shook his head. "Forgive me. You shall hear from me later in the day."

No tears! no flaming-up of the quick temper that I knew so well! Nothing in his face, nothing in his voice, nothing in his manner, but a composure miserable to see--the composure of despair.

"At least, let me accompany you to the gate," I said.

"God bless and reward you!" he answered. "Let me go."

With a gentle hand--and yet with a firmness which took me completely by surprise--he separated himself from me, and went out.

I could stand no longer--I dropped trembling into a chair. The conviction forced itself on me that there were worse complications, direr misfortunes, still to come. I was almost beside myself--I broke out vehemently with wild words spoken in my own language. Mrs. Finch recalled me to my senses. I saw her as in a dream, drying her tears, and looking at me in alarm. The rector approached, with profuse expressions of sympathy and offers of assistance. I wanted no comforting. I had served a hard apprenticeship to life; I had been well seasoned to trouble. "Thank you, sir," I said. "Look to Mrs. Finch." There was more air in the corridor. I went out again, to walk about, and get the better of it there.

A small object attracted my attention, crouched up on one of the window seats. The small object was--Jicks.

I suppose the child's instinct must have told her that something had gone wrong. She looked furtively sideways at me, round her doll: she had grave doubts of my intentions towards her. "Are you going to whack Jicks?" asked the curious little creature, shrinking into her corner. I sat down by her, and soon recovered my place in her confidence. She began to chatter again as fast as usual. I listened to her as I could have listened to no grown-up person at that moment. In some mysterious way that I cannot explain, the child comforted me. Little by little, I learnt what she had wanted with me, when she had attempted to drag me out of the room. She had seen all that had passed in the bed-chamber; and she had run out to take me back with her, and show me the wonderful sight of Lucilla with the bandage off her eyes. If I had been wise enough to listen to Jicks, I might have prevented the catastrophe that had happened. I might have met Lucilla in the corridor, and have forced her back into her own room and turned the key on her.

It was too late now to regret what had happened. "Jicks has been good," I said, patting my little friend on the head with a heavy heart. The child listened--considered with herself gravely--got off the window-seat--and claimed her reward for being good, with that excellent brevity of speech which so eminently distinguished her:

"Jicks will go out."

With those words, she shouldered her doll; and walked off. The last I saw of her, she was descending the stairs as a workman descends a ladder, on her way to the garden--and from the garden (the first time the gate was opened) to the hills. If I could have gone out with her light heart, I would have joined Jicks.

I had hardly lost sight of the child, before the door of Lucilla's room opened, and Herr Grosse appeared in the corridor.

"Soh!" he muttered with a gesture of relief, "the very womans I was looking for. A nice mess-fix we are in now! I must stop with Feench. (I shall end in hating Feench!) Can you put me into a beds for the night?"

I assured him that he could easily sleep at the rectory. In answer to my inquiries after his patient, he gravely acknowledged that he was anxious about Lucilla. The varying and violent emotions which had shaken her (acting through her nervous system) might produce results which would imperil the recovery of her sight. Absolute repose was not simply necessary--it was now the only chance for her. For the next four-and-twenty hours, he

must keep watch over her eyes. At the end of that time--no earlier--he might be able to say whether the mischief done would be fatal to her sight or not. I asked how she had contrived to get her bandage off, and to make her fatal entrance into the sitting-room.

He shrugged his shoulders. "There are times," he said cynically, "when every womans is a hussy, and every mans is a fool. This was one of the times."

It appeared, on further explanation, that my poor Lucilla had pleaded so earnestly (after the nurse had left the room) to be allowed to try her eyes, and had shown such ungovernable disappointment when he persisted in saying No, that he had yielded--not so much to her entreaties, as to his own conviction that it would be less dangerous to humour her than to thwart her, with such a sensitive and irritable temperament as hers. He had first bargained however, on his side, that she should remain in the bed-chamber, and be content, for that time, with using her sight on the objects round her in the room. She had promised all that he asked--and he had been foolish enough to trust to her promise. The bandage once off, she had instantly set every consideration at defiance--had torn herself out of his hands like a mad creature--and had rushed into the sitting-room before he could stop her. The rest had followed as a matter of course. Feeble as it was at the first trial of it, her sense of sight was sufficiently restored to enable her to distinguish objects dimly. Of the three persons who had offered themselves to view on the right-hand side of the door, one (Mrs. Finch) was a woman; another (Mr. Finch) was a short, grey-headed, elderly man; the third (Nugent), in his height--which she could see--and in the color of his hair--which she could see--was the only one of the three who could possibly represent Oscar. The catastrophe that followed was (as things were) inevitable. Now that the harm was done, the one alternative left was to check the mischief at the point which it had already reached. Not the slightest hint at the terrible mistake that she had made must be suffered to reach her ears. If we any of us said one word about it before he authorized us to do so, he would refuse to answer for the consequences, and would then and there throw up the case.

So, in his broken English, Herr Grosse explained what had happened, and issued his directions for our future conduct.

"No person is to go into her," he said, in conclusion, "but you and goot Mrs. Zillahs. You two watch her, turn-about-turn-about. In a whiles, she will sleep. For me, I go to smoke my tobaccos in the garden. Hear this, Madame Pratolungo. When Gott made the womens, he was sorry afterwards for the poor mens--and he made tobaccos to comfort them."

Favoring me with this peculiar view of the scheme of creation, Herr Grosse shook his shock head, and waddled away to the garden.

I softly opened the bed-room door, and looked in--disappearing just in time to escape the rector and Mrs. Finch returning to their own side of the house.

Lucilla was lying on the sofa. She asked who it was in a drowsy voice--she was happily just sinking into slumber. Zillah occupied a chair near her. I was not wanted for the moment--and I was glad, for the first time in my experience at Dimchurch, to get out of the room again. By some contradiction in my character which I am not able to explain, there was a certain hostile influence in the sympathy that I felt for Oscar, which estranged me, for the moment, from Lucilla. It was not her fault--and yet (I am ashamed to own it) I almost felt angry with her for reposing so comfortably, when I thought of the poor fellow, without a creature to say a kind word to him, alone at Browndown.

Out again in the corridor, the question faced me:--What was I to do next?

The loneliness of the house was insupportable; my anxiety about Oscar grew more than I could endure. I put on my hat, and went out.

Having no desire to interfere with Herr Grosse's enjoyment of his pipe, I made my way through the garden as quickly as possible, and found myself in the village again. My uneasiness on the subject of Oscar, was matched by my angry desire to know what Nugent would do. Now that he had worked the very mischief which his brother had foreseen to be possible--the very mischief which it had been Oscar's one object to prevent in asking him to leave Dimchurch--would he take his departure? would he rid us, at once and for ever, of the sight of him? The bare idea of the other alternative--I mean, of his remaining in the place--shook me with such an unutterable dread of what might happen next, that my feet refused to support me. I was obliged, just beyond the village, to sit down by the road-side, and wait till my giddy head steadied itself before I attempted to move again.

After a minute or two, I heard footsteps coming along the road. My heart gave one great leap in me. I thought it was Nugent.

A moment more brought the person in view. It was only Mr. Gootheridge of the village inn, on his way home. He stopped, and took off his hat.

"Tired, ma'am?" he said.

The uppermost idea in my mind found its way somehow, ill as I was, to expression on my lips--in the form of a question addressed to the landlord.

"Do you happen to have seen anything of Mr. Nugent Dubourg?" I asked.

"I saw him not five minutes since, ma'am."

"Where?"

"Going into Browndown."

I started up, as if I had been struck or shot. Worthy Mr. Gootheridge stared. I wished him good-day, and went on as fast as my feet would take me, straight to Browndown. Had the brothers met in the house? I turned cold at the bare thought of it--but I still kept on. There was an obstinate resolution in me to part them, which served me in place of courage. Account for it as you may, I was bold and frightened both at the same time. At one moment, I was fool enough to say to myself, "They will kill me." At another, just as foolishly, I found comfort in the opposite view. "Bah! They are gentlemen; they can't hurt a woman!"

The servant was standing idling at the front door, when I arrived in sight of the house. This, in itself, was unusual. He was a hard-working well-trained man. On other occasions, nobody had ever seen him out of his proper place. He advanced a few steps to meet me. I looked at him carefully. Not the slightest appearance of disturbance was visible in his face.

"Is Mr. Oscar at home?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. Mr. Oscar is at home--but you can't see him. He and Mr. Nugent are together."

I rested my hand on the low wall in front of the house, and made a desperate effort to put a calm face on it.

"Surely Mr. Oscar will see me?" I said.

"I have Mr. Oscar's orders, ma'am, to wait at the door, and tell everybody who comes to the house (without exception) that he is engaged."

The house-door was half open. I listened intently while the man was speaking. If they had been at high words together, I must have heard them in the silence of the lonely hills all round us. I heard nothing.

It was strange, it was inconceivable. At the same time it relieved me. There they were together, and no harm had come of it, so far.

I left my card--and walked on a little, past the corner of the house wall. As soon as I was out of the servant's sight, I turned back to the side of the building, and ventured as near as I durst to the window of the sitting-room. Their voices reached me, but not their words. On both sides, the tones were low and confidential. Not a note of anger in either voice--listen for it as I might! I left the house again, breathless with amazement, and (so rapidly does a woman shift from one emotion to another) burning with curiosity.

After half an hour of aimless wandering in the valley, I returned to the rectory.

Lucilla was still sleeping. I took Zillah's place, and sent her into the kitchen. The landlady of the inn was there to help us with the dinner. But she was hardly equal, single-handed, to the superintendence of such dishes as we had to set before Herr Grosse. It was high time I relieved Zillah if we were to pass successfully through the ordeal of the great surgeon's criticism, as reviewer of all the sauces.

An hour more passed before Lucilla woke. I sent a messenger to Grosse, who appeared enveloped in a halo of tobacco, examined the patient's eyes, felt her pulse, ordered her wine and jelly, filled his monstrous pipe, and gruffly returned to his promenade in the garden.

The day wore on. Mr. Finch came to make inquiries, and then went back to his wife--whom he described as "hysterically irresponsible," and in imminent need of another warm bath. He declined, in his most pathetic manner, to meet the German at dinner. "After what I have suffered, after what I have seen, these banquetings--I would say, these ticklings of the palate--are not to my taste. You mean well, Madame Pratolungo. (Good creature!) But I am not in heart for feasting. Simple fare, by my wife's couch; a few consoling words, in the character of pastor and husband, when the infant is quiet. So my day is laid out. I wish you well. I don't object to your little dinner. Good day! good day!"

A second examination of Lucilla's eyes brought us to the dinner-hour.

At the sight of the table-cloth, Herr Grosse's good humour returned. We two dined together alone--the German sending in selections of his own making from the dishes to Lucilla's room. So far, he said, she had escaped any

serious injury. But he still insisted on keeping his patient perfectly quiet, and he refused to answer for anything until the night had passed. As for me, Oscar's continued silence weighed more and more heavily on my spirits. My past suspense in the darkened room with Lucilla seemed to be a mere trifle by comparison with the keener anxieties which I suffered now. I saw Grosse's eyes glaring discontentedly at me through his spectacles. He had good reason to look at me as he did--I had never before been so stupid and so disagreeable in all my life.

Towards the end of the dinner, there came news from Browndown at last. The servant sent in a message by Zillah, begging me to see him for a moment outside the sitting-room door.

I made my excuses to my guest, and hurried out.

The instant I saw the servant's face, my heart sank. Oscar's kindness had attached the man devotedly to his master. I saw his lips tremble, and his color come and go, when I looked at him.

"I have brought you a letter, ma'am."

He handed me a letter addressed to me in Oscar's handwriting.

"How is your master?" I asked.

"Not very well, when I saw him last."

"When you saw him last?"

"I bring sad news, ma'am. There's a break-up at Browndown."

"What do you mean? Where is Mr. Oscar?"

"Mr. Oscar has left Dimchurch."