

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-SEVENTH

The Brothers change Places

I VAINLY believed I had prepared myself for any misfortune that could fall on us. The man's last words dispelled my delusion. My gloomiest forebodings had never contemplated such a disaster as had now happened. I stood petrified, thinking of Lucilla, and looking helplessly at the servant. Try as I might, I was perfectly incapable of speaking to him.

He felt no such difficulty on his side. One of the strangest peculiarities in the humbler ranks of the English people, is the sort of solemn relish which they have for talking of their own misfortunes. To be the objects of a calamity of any kind, seems to raise them in their own estimations. With a dreary enjoyment of his miserable theme, the servant expatiated on his position as a man deprived of the best of masters; turned adrift again in the world to seek another service; hopeless of ever again finding himself in such a situation as he had lost. He roused me at last into speaking to him, by sheer dint of irritating my nerves until I could endure him no longer.

"Has Mr. Oscar gone away alone?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am, quite alone."

(What had become of Nugent? I was too much interested in Oscar to be able to put the question, at that moment.)

"When did your master go?" I went on.

"Better than two hours since."

"Why didn't I hear of it before?"

"I had Mr. Oscar's orders not to tell you, ma'am, till this time in the evening."

Wretched as I was already, my spirits sank lower still when I heard that. The order given to the servant looked like a premeditated design, not only to leave Dimchurch, but also to keep us in ignorance of his whereabouts afterwards.

"Has Mr. Oscar gone to London?" I inquired.

"He hired Gootheridge's chaise, ma'am, to take him to Brighton. And he told me with his own lips that he had left Browndown never to come back. I know no more of it than that."

He had left Browndown, never to come back! For Lucilla's sake, I declined to believe that. The servant was exaggerating, or the servant had misunderstood what had been said to him. The letter in my hand reminded me that I had perhaps needlessly questioned him on matters which his master had confided to my own knowledge only. Before I dismissed him for the night, I made my deferred inquiry on the hateful subject of the other brother.

"Where is Mr. Nugent?"

"At Browndown."

"Do you mean to say that he is going to stay at Browndown?"

"I don't know, ma'am, for certain. I see no signs of his meaning to leave; and he has said nothing to that effect."

I had the greatest difficulty to keep myself from breaking out before the servant. My indignation almost choked me. The best way was to wish him good night. I took the best way--only calling him back (as a measure of caution) to say one last word.

"Have you told anybody at the rectory of Mr. Oscar's departure?" I asked.

"No, ma'am."

"Say nothing, about it then, as you go out. Thank you for bringing me the letter. Good night."

Having thus provided against any whisper of what had happened reaching Lucilla's ears that evening, I returned to Herr Grosse to make my excuses, and to tell him (as I honestly could) that I was in sore need of being permitted to retire privately to my own room. I found my illustrious guest putting a plate over the final dish of the dinner, full of the tenderest anxiety to keep it warm on my account.

"Here is a lovely cheese-omelets," said Grosse. "Two-thirds of him I have

eaten my own self. The odder third I sweat with anxiety to keep warm for you. Sit down! sit down! Every moment he is getting cold."

"I am much obliged to you, Herr Grosse. I have just heard some miserable news----"

"Ach, Gott! don't tell it to me!" the wretch burst out with a look of consternation. "No miserable news, I pray you, after such a dinner as I have eaten. Let me do my digestions! My goot-dear-creature, if you lofe me let me do my digestions!"

"Will you excuse me, if I leave you to your digestion, and retire to my own room?"

He rose in a violent hurry, and opened the door for me.

"Yes! yes! From the deep bottoms of my heart I excuse you. Goot Madame Pratolungo, retire! retire!"

I had barely passed the threshold, before the door was closed behind me. I heard the selfish old brute rub his hands, and chuckle over his success in shutting me and my sorrow both out of the room together.

Just as my hand was on my own door, it occurred to me that I should do well to make sure of not being surprised by Lucilla over the reading of Oscar's letter. The truth is that I shrank from reading it. In spite of my resolution to disbelieve the servant, the dread was now growing on me that the letter would confirm his statement, and would force it on me as the truth that Oscar had left us never to return. I retraced my steps, and entered Lucilla's room.

I could just see her, by the dim night-light burning in a cornet to enable the surgeon or the nurse to find their way to her. She was alone in her favorite little wicker-work chair, with the doleful white bandage over her eyes--to all appearance quite content, busily knitting!

"Don't you feel lonely, Lucilla?"

She turned her head towards me, and answered in her gayest tones.

"Not in the least. I am quite happy as I am.

"Why is Zillah not with you?"

"I sent her away."

"You sent her away?"

"Yes! I couldn't enjoy myself thoroughly to-night, unless I felt that I was quite alone. I have seen him, my dear--I have seen him! How could you possibly think I felt lonely? I am so inordinately happy that I am obliged to knit to keep myself quiet. If you say much more, I shall get up and dance--I know I shall! Where is Oscar? That odious Grosse--no! it is too bad to talk of the dear old man in that way, after he has given me back my sight. Still it is cruel of him to say that I am overexcited, and to forbid Oscar to come and see me to-night. Is Oscar with you, in the next room? Is he very much disappointed at being parted from me in this way? Say I am thinking of him--since I have seen him--with such new thoughts!"

"Oscar is not here to-night, my dear."

"No? then he is at Browndown of course with that poor wretched disfigured brother of his. I have got over my terror of Nugent's hideous face. I am even beginning (though I never liked him, as you know) to pity him, with such a dreadful complexion as that. Don't let us talk about it! Don't let us talk at all! I want to go on thinking of Oscar."

She resumed her knitting, and shut herself up luxuriously in her own happy thoughts. Knowing what I knew, it was nothing less than heart-breaking to see her and hear her. Afraid to trust myself to say another word, I softly closed the door, and charged Zillah (when her mistress rang her bell) to say for me that I was weary after the events of the day, and had gone to rest in my bed-room.

At last, I was alone. At last I was at the end of my maneuvers to spare myself the miserable necessity of opening Oscar's letter. After first locking my door, I broke the seal, and read the lines which follow.

"KIND AND DEAR FRIEND,--Forgive me: I am going to surprise and distress you. My letter thanks you gratefully; and bids you a last farewell.

"Summon all your indulgence for me. Read these lines to the end: they will tell you what happened after I left the rectory.

"Nothing had been seen of Nugent, when I reached this house. It was not till a quarter of an hour later that I heard his voice at the door, calling to me, and asking if I had come back. I answered, and he joined me in the sitting-room. Nugent's first words to me were these:--" 'Oscar, I have come to ask your pardon, and to bid you good-bye.'

"I can give you no idea of the tone in which he spoke to me: it would have gone straight to your heart, as it went straight to mine. For the moment, I was not able to answer him. I could only offer him my hand. He sighed bitterly, and refused to take it.

"'I have something still to tell you,' he said. 'Wait till you have heard it; and give me your hand afterwards--if you can.'

"He even refused to take the chair to which I pointed. He distressed me by standing in my presence as if he was my inferior. The next words that he said to me--

"No! I have need of all my calmness and all my courage. It shakes both to recall what he said to me. I sat down to write this, intending to repeat to you everything that passed between us. Another of my weaknesses! another of my failures! The tears come into my eyes again, when my mind attempts to dwell on the details. I can only tell you the result. My brother's confession may be summed up in three words. Prepare yourself to be startled; prepare yourself to be grieved.

"Nugent loves her.

"Think of this discovery falling on me, after I had seen my innocent Lucilla's arms round his neck--after my own eyes had shown me how she rejoiced over her first sight of him; how she shuddered at her first sight of me! Need I tell you what I suffered? No.

"Nugent held out his hand, when he had done--as I had held out mine before he began.

"'The one atonement I can make to you and to her,' he said, 'is never to let either of you set eyes on me again. Shake hands, Oscar; and let me go.'

"If I had willed it so--so it might have ended. I willed it differently. It has ended differently. Can you guess how?"

I laid down the letter for a moment. It cut me with such keen regret; it fired me with such hot rage--that I was within a hairsbreadth of tearing the rest of it up unread, and trampling it under my feet. I took a turn in the room. I dipped my handkerchief in water, and bound it round my head. In a minute or two I was myself again--I could force my mind away from my poor Lucilla, and return to the letter. It proceeded thus:

"I can write calmly of what I have next to tell you. You shall hear what I have decided, and what I have done.

"I told Nugent to wait in the room, while I went away, and thought over what he had said to me, by myself. He attempted to resist this. I insisted on his yielding. For the first time in our lives, we changed places. It was I who took the lead, and he who followed. I left him and went out into the valley alone.

"The heavenly tranquillity, the comforting solitude helped me. I saw my position and his, in their true light. Before I got back, I had decided (cost me what it might) on myself making the sacrifice to which my brother had offered to submit. For Lucilla's sake, and for Nugent's sake, I felt the certain assurance in my own mind that it was my duty, and not his, to go.

"Don't blame me; don't grieve for me. Read the rest. I want you to think of this with my thoughts--to feel about it as I feel at this moment.

"Bearing in mind what Nugent has confessed, and what I have myself seen, have I any right to hold Lucilla to her engagement? I am firmly persuaded that I have no right. After inspiring her with terror and disgust at the moment when her eyes first looked at me; after seeing her innocently happy in Nugent's arms--how, in God's name, can I claim her as mine? Our marriage has become an impossibility. For her own sake, I cannot, I dare not, appeal to our engagement. The wreck of my happiness is nothing. The wreck of her happiness would be a crime. I absolve her from her engagement. She is free.

"There is my duty towards Lucilla--as I see it.

"As to Nugent next. I owe it entirely to my brother (at the time of the Trial) that the honor of our family has been saved, and that I have escaped a shameful death on the scaffold. Is there any limit to the obligation that he has laid on me, after doing me such a service as this? There is no limit. The man who loves Lucilla and the brother who has saved my life are one. I am bound to leave him free--I do leave him free--to win Lucilla by open and loyal

means, if he can. As soon as Herr Grosse considers that she is fit to bear the disclosure, let her be told of the error into which she has fallen (through my fault)--let her read these lines, purposely written to meet her eye as well as yours--and let my brother tell her afterwards what has passed to-night in this house between himself and me. She loves him now, believing him to be Oscar. Will she love him still, after she has learnt to know him under his own name? The answer to that question rests with Time. If it is an answer in Nugent's favor, I have already arranged to set aside from my income a sufficient yearly sum to place my brother in a position to begin his married life. I wish to leave his genius free to assert itself, untrammelled by pecuniary cares. Possessing, as I do, far more than enough for my own simple wants, I can dedicate my spare money to no better and nobler use than this.

"There is my duty towards Nugent--as I see it.

"What I have decided on you now know. What I have done can be told in two words. I have left Browndown for ever. I have gone, to live or die (as God pleases) under the blow that has fallen on me, far away from you all.

"Perhaps, when years have passed, and when their children are growing up round them, I may see Lucilla again, and may take as the hand of my sister, the hand of the beloved woman who might once have been my wife. This may happen, if I live. If I die, you will none of you know it. My death shall not cast its shadow of sadness on their lives. Forgive me and forget me; and keep, as I keep, that first and noblest of all mortal hopes--the hope of the life to come.

"I enclose, when there is need for you to write to me, the address of my bankers in London. They will have their instructions. If you love me, if you pity me, abstain from attempting to shake my resolution. You may distress me--but you will never change me. Wait to write, until Nugent has had the opportunity of pleading his own cause, and Lucilla has decided on her future life.

"Once more, I thank you for the kindness which has borne with my weaknesses and my follies. God bless you--and goodbye.

"OSCAR."

Of the effect which the first reading of this letter produced on me, I shall say nothing. Even at this distance of time, I shrink from reviving the memory of

what I suffered, alone in my room on that miserable night. Let it be enough if I tell you briefly at what decision I arrived.

I determined on doing two things. First, on going to London by the earliest train the next morning, and finding my way to Oscar by means of his bankers. Secondly, on preventing the villain who had accepted the sacrifice of his brother's happiness from entering the rectory in my absence.

The one comfort I had, that night, was in feeling that, on these two points, my mind was made up. There was a stimulant in my sense of my own resolution which strengthened me to make my excuses to Lucilla, without betraying the grief that tortured me when I found myself in her presence again. Before I went to my bed, I had left her quiet and happy; I had arranged with Herr Grosse that he was still to keep his excitable patient secluded from visitors all through the next day; and I had secured as an ally to help me in preventing Nugent from entering the house, no less a person than Reverend Finch himself. I saw him in his study overnight, and told him all that had happened; keeping one circumstance only concealed--namely, Oscar's insane determination to share his fortune with his infamous brother. I purposely led the rector to suppose that Oscar had left Lucilla free to receive the addresses of a man who had dissipated his fortune to the last farthing. Mr. Finch's harangue when this prospect was brought within his range of contemplation, was something to be remembered, but not (on this occasion) to be reported--in mercy to the Church.

By the train of the next morning, I left for London.

By the train of the same evening, I returned alone to Dimchurch; having completely failed to achieve the purpose which taken me to the metropolis.

Oscar had appeared at the bank as soon as the doors were opened in the morning; had drawn out some hundreds of pounds in circular notes; had told the bankers that they should be furnished with an address at which they could write to him, in due course of time; and had departed for the Continent, without leaving a trace behind him.

I spent the day in making what arrangements I could for discovering him by the usual methods of inquiry pursued in such cases; and took the return train to the country, with my mind alternating between despair when I thought of Lucilla, and anger when I thought of the twin-brothers. In the first bitterness of my disappointment, I was quite as indignant with Oscar as with Nugent. With all my heart I cursed the day which had brought the one and the other to Dimchurch.

As we lengthened our distance from London, flying smoothly the tranquil woods and fields, my mind, with time to help it, began to recover its balance. Little by little, the unexpected revelation of firmness and decision in Oscar's conduct--heartily as I still deplored and blamed that conduct--began to have a new effect on my mind. I now looked back in amazement and self-reproach, at my own superficial estimate of the characters of the twin-brothers.

Thinking it over uninterruptedly, with no one in the carriage but myself, I arrived at a conclusion which strongly influenced my conduct in guiding Lucilla through the troubles and perils that were still to come.

Our physical constitutions have, as I take it, more to do with the actions which determine other people's opinions of us (as well as with the course of our own lives) than we generally suppose. A man with delicately-strung nerves says and does things which often lead us to think more meanly of him than he deserves. It is his great misfortune constantly to present himself at his worst. On the other hand, a man provided with nerves vigorously constituted, is provided also with a constitutional health and hardihood which express themselves brightly in his manners, and which lead to a mistaken impression that his nature is what it appears to be on the surface. Having good health, he has good spirits. Having good spirits, he wins as an agreeable companion on the persons with whom he comes in contact--although he may be hiding all the while, under an outer covering which is physically wholesome, an inner nature which is morally diseased. In the last of these typical men, I saw reflected--Nugent. In the first--Oscar. All that was feeblest and poorest in Oscar's nature had shown itself on the surface in past times, to the concealment of its stronger and its nobler side. There had been something hidden in this supersensitive man, who had shrunk under all the small trials of his life in our village, which had proved firm enough, when the greatness of the need called on it, to sustain the terrible disaster that had fallen on him. The nearer I got to the end of my journey, the more certain I felt that I was only now learning (bitterly as he had disappointed me) to estimate Oscar's character at its true value. Inspired by this conviction, I began already to face our hopeless prospects boldly. As long as I had life and strength to help her, I determined that Lucilla should not lose the man, whose best qualities I had failed to discover until he had made up his mind to turn his back on her for ever.

When I reached the rectory, I was informed that Mr. Finch wished to speak to me. My anxiety about Lucilla made me unwilling to submit to any delay in seeing her. I sent a message, informing the rector that I would be with him

in a few minutes--and ran up-stairs into Lucilla's room.

"Has it been a very long day, my dear?" I asked, when our first greetings were over.

"It has been a delightful day," she answered joyously. "Grosse took me out for a walk, before he went back to London. Can you guess where our walk led us?"

A chilly sense of misgiving seized me. I drew back from her. I looked at her lovely face without the slightest admiration of it--worse still, with downright distrust of it.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"To Browndown, of course!"

An exclamation escaped me--("Infamous Grosse!" spit out between my teeth in my own language). I could not help it. I should have died if I had repressed it--I was in such a rage.

Lucilla laughed. "There! there! It was my fault; I insisted on speaking to Oscar. As soon as I had my own way, I behaved perfectly. I never asked to have the bandage taken off; I was satisfied with only speaking to him. Dear old Grosse--he isn't half as hard on me as you and my father--was with us, all the time. It has done me so much good. Don't be sulky about it, you darling Pratolungo! My 'surgeon optic' sanctions my imprudence. I won't ask you to go with me to Browndown to-morrow; Oscar is coming to return my visit."

Those last words decided me. I had had a weary time of it since the morning; but (for me) the day was not at an end yet. I said to myself, "I will have it out with Mr. Nugent Dubourg, before I go to my bed to-night!"

"Can you spare me for a little while?" I asked. "I must go to the other side of the house. Your father wishes to speak to me."

Lucilla started. "About what?" she inquired eagerly.

"About business in London," I answered--and left her, before her curiosity could madden me (in the state I was in at that moment) with more questions.

I found the rector prepared to favor me with his usual flow of language. Fifty Mr. Finches could not have possessed themselves of my attention in the humour I was in at that moment. To the reverend gentleman's amazement, it was I who began--and not he.

"I have just left Lucilla, Mr. Finch. I know what has happened."

"Wait a minute, Madame Pratolungo! One thing is of the utmost importance to begin with. Do you thoroughly understand that I am, in no sense of the word, to blame--?"

"Thoroughly," I interposed. "Of course, they would not have gone to Browndown, if you had consented to let Nugent Dubourg into the house."

"Stop!" said Mr. Finch, elevating his right hand. "My good creature, you are in a state of hysterical precipitation. I will be heard! I did more than refuse my consent. When the man Grosse--I insist on your composing yourself--when the man Grosse came and spoke to me about it, I did more, I say, infinitely more, than refuse my consent. You know my force of language--don't be alarmed! I said, 'Sir! As pastor and parent, My Foot is down'----"

"I understand, Mr. Finch. Whatever you said to Herr Grosse was quite useless; he entirely ignored your personal point of view."

"Madame Pratolungo----!"

"He found Lucilla dangerously agitated by her separation from Oscar: he asserted, what he calls, his professional freedom of action."

"Madame Pratolungo----!"

"You persisted in closing your doors to Nugent Dubourg. He persisted, on his side--and took Lucilla to Browndown."

Mr. Finch got on his feet, and asserted himself at the full pitch of his tremendous voice.

"Silence!" he shouted, with a smack of his open hand on the table at his side.

I didn't care. I shouted. I came down, with a smack of my hand, on the opposite side of the table.

"One question, sir, before I leave you," I said. "Since your daughter went to Browndown, you have had many hours at your disposal. Have you seen Mr. Nugent Dubourg?"

The Pope of Dimchurch suddenly collapsed, in full fulmination of his domestic Bulls.

"Pardon me," he replied, adopting his most elaborately polite manner. "This requires considerable explanation."

I declined to wait for considerable explanation. "You have not seen him?" I said.

"I have not seen him," echoed Mr. Finch. "My position towards Nugent Dubourg is very remarkable, Madame Pratolungo. In my parental character, I should like to wring his neck. In my clerical character, I feel it incumbent on me to pause--and write to him. You feel the responsibility? You understand the distinction?"

I understood that he was afraid. Answering him by an inclination of the head (I hate a coward!) I walked silently to the door.

Mr. Finch returned my bow with a look of helpless perplexity. "Are you going to leave me?" he inquired blandly.

"I am going to Browndown."

If I had said that I was going to a place which the rector had frequent occasion to mention in the stronger passages of his sermons, Mr. Finch's face could hardly have shown more astonishment and alarm than it exhibited when I replied to him in those terms. He lifted his persuasive right hand; he opened his eloquent lips. Before the coming overflow of language could reach me, I was out of the room, on my way to Browndown.