

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-EIGHTH

Is there no Excuse for Him?

OSCAR'S dismissed servant (left, during the usual month of warning, to take care of the house) opened the door to me when I knocked. Although the hour was already a late one in primitive Dimchurch, the man showed no signs of surprise at seeing me.

"Is Mr. Nugent Dubourg at home?"

"Yes, ma'am." He lowered his voice, and added, "I think Mr. Nugent expected to see you to-night."

Whether he intended it, or not, the servant had done me a good turn--he had put me on my guard. Nugent Dubourg understood my character better than I had understood his. He had foreseen what would happen, when I heard of Lucilla's visit on my return to the rectory--and he had, no doubt, prepared himself accordingly. I was conscious of a certain nervous trembling (I own) as I followed the servant to the sitting-room. At the moment, however, when he opened the door, this ignoble sensation left me as suddenly as it had come. I felt myself Pratulungo's widow again, when I entered the room.

A reading-lamp, with its shade down, was the only light on the table. Nugent Dubourg, comfortably reposing in an easychair, sat by the lamp, with a cigar in his mouth, and a book in his hand. He put down the book on the table as he rose to receive me. Knowing, by this time, what sort of man I had to deal with, I was determined not to let even the merest trifles escape me. It might have its use in helping me to understand him, if I knew how he had been occupying his mind while he was expecting me to arrive. I looked at the book. It was Rousseau's Confessions.

He advanced with his pleasant smile, and offered his hand as if nothing had happened to disturb our ordinary relations towards each other. I drew back a step, and looked at him.

"Won't you shake hands with me?" he asked.

"I will answer that directly," I said. "Where is your brother?"

"I don't know."

"When you do know, Mr. Nugent Dubourg, and when you have brought your brother back to this house, I will take your hand--not before."

He bowed resignedly, with a little satirical shrug of the shoulders, and asked if he might offer me a chair.

I took a chair for myself, and placed it so that I might be opposite to him when he resumed his seat. He checked himself in the act of sitting down, and looked towards the open window.

"Shall I throw away my cigar?" he said.

"Not on my account. I have no objection to smoking."

"Thank you." He took his chair--keeping his face in the partial obscurity cast by the shade of the lamp. After smoking for a moment, he spoke again, without turning to look at me. "May I ask what your object is in honoring me with this visit?"

"I have two objects. The first is to see that you leave Dimchurch to-morrow morning. The second is to make you restore your brother to his promised wife."

He looked round at me quickly. His experience of my irritable temper had not prepared him for the perfect composure of voice and manner with which I answered his question. He looked back again from me to his cigar, and knocked off the ash at the tip of it (considering with himself) before he addressed his next words to me.

"We will come to the question of my leaving Dimchurch presently," he said. "Have you received a letter from Oscar?"

"Yes."

"Have you read it?"

"I have read it."

"Then you know that we understand each other?"

"I know that your brother has sacrificed himself--and that you have taken a

base advantage of the sacrifice."

He started, and looked round at me once more. I saw that something in my language, or in my tone of speaking, had stung him.

"You have your privilege as a lady," he said. "Don't push it too far. What Oscar has done, he has done of his own free will."

"What Oscar has done," I rejoined, "is lamentably foolish, cruelly wrong. Still, perverted as it is, there is something generous, something noble, in the motive which has led him. As for your conduct in this matter, I see nothing but what is mean, nothing but what is cowardly, in the motive which has led you."

He started to his feet, and flung his cigar into the empty fireplace.

"Madame Pratolungo," he said, "I have not the honor of knowing anything of your family. I can't call a woman to account for insulting me. Do you happen to have any man related to you, in or out of England?"

"I happen to have what will do equally well on this occasion," I replied. "I have a hearty contempt for threats of all sorts, and a steady resolution in me to say what I think."

He walked to the door, and opened it.

"I decline to give you the opportunity of saying anything more," he rejoined. "I beg to leave you in possession of the room, and to wish you good evening."

He opened the door. I had entered the house, armed in my own mind with a last desperate resolve, only to be communicated to him, or to anybody, in the final emergency and at the eleventh hour. The time had come for saying what I had hoped with my whole heart to have left unsaid.

I rose on my side, and stopped him as he was leaving the room.

"Return to your chair and your book," I said. "Our interview is at an end. In leaving the house, I have one last word to say. You are wasting your time in remaining at Dimchurch."

"I am the best judge of that," he answered, making way for me to go out.

"Pardon me, you are not in a position to judge at all. You don't know what I

mean to do as soon as I get back to the rectory."

He instantly changed his position; placing himself in the doorway so as to prevent me from leaving the room.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked, keeping his eyes attentively fixed on mine.

"I mean to force you to leave Dimchurch."

He laughed insolently. I went on as quietly as before. "You have personated your brother to Lucilla this morning," I said. "You have done that, Mr. Nugent Dubourg, for the last time."

"Have I? Who will prevent me from doing it again?"

"I will."

This time he took it seriously.

"You?" he said. "How are you to control me, if you please?"

"I can control you through Lucilla. When I get back to the rectory, I can, and will, tell Lucilla the truth."

He started--and instantly recovered himself.

"You forget something, Madame Pratolungo. You forget what the surgeon in attendance on her has told us."

"I remember it perfectly. If we say or do anything to agitate his patient, in her present state, the surgeon refuses to answer for the consequences."

"Well?"

"Well--between the alternative of leaving you free to break both their hearts, and the alternative of setting the surgeon's warning at defiance--dreadful as the choice is, my choice is made. I tell you to your face, I would rather see Lucilla blind again than see her your wife."

His estimate of the strength of the position on his side, had been necessarily based on one conviction--the conviction that Grosse's professional authority would tie my tongue. I had scattered his calculations to the winds. He

turned so deadly pale that, dim as the light was, I could see the change in his face.

"I don't believe you!" he said.

"Present yourself at the rectory tomorrow," I answered--"and you will see. I have no more to say to you. Let me by."

You may suppose I was only trying to frighten him. I was doing nothing of the sort. Blame me, or approve of me, as you please, I was expressing the resolution which I had in my mind when I spoke. Whether my courage would have held out through the walk from Browndown to the rectory--whether I should have shrunk from it when I actually found myself in Lucilla's presence--is more than I can venture to decide. All I say is that I did, in my desperation, positively mean doing it, at the moment when I threatened to do it--and that Nugent Dubourg heard something in my voice which told him I was in earnest.

"You fiend!" he burst out, stepping close up to me with a look of fury.

The whole passionate fervour of the love that the miserable wretch felt for her, shook him from head to foot, as his horror of me found its way to expression in those two words.

"Spare me your opinion of my character," I said. "I don't expect you to understand the motives of an honest woman. For the last time, let me by!"

Instead of letting me by, he locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. That done, he pointed to the chair that I had left.

"Sit down," he said, with a sudden sinking in his voice which implied a sudden change in his temper. "Let me have a minute to myself."

I returned to my place. He took his own chair on the other side of the table, and covered his face with his hands. We waited awhile in silence. I looked at him, once or twice, as the minutes followed each other. The shaded lamp-light glistened dimly on something between his fingers. I rose softly, and stretched across the table to look closer. Tears! On my word of honor, tears forcing their way through his fingers, as he held them over his face! I had been on the point of speaking. I sat down again in silence.

"Say what you want of me. Tell me what you wish me to do." Those were his first words. He spoke them without moving his hands; so quietly, so sadly,

with such hopeless sorrow, such uncomplaining resignation in his voice, that I, who had entered that room, hating him, rose again, and went round to his chair. I--who a minute ago, if I had had the strength, would have struck him down on the floor at my feet--laid my hand on his shoulder, pitying him from the bottom of my heart. That is what women are! There is a specimen of their sense, firmness, and self-control!

"Be just, Nugent," I said. "Be honorable. Be all that I once thought you. I want no more."

He dropped his arms on the table: his head fell on them, and he burst into a fit of crying. It was so like his brother, that I could almost have fancied I, too, had mistaken one of them for the other. "Oscar over again," I thought to myself, "on the first day when I spoke to him in this very room!"

"Come!" I said, when he was quieter. "We shall end in understanding each other and respecting each other after all."

He irritably shook my hand off his shoulder, and turned his face away from the light.

"Don't talk of understanding me," he said. "Your sympathy is for Oscar. He is the victim; he is the martyr; he has all your consideration and all your pity. I am a coward; I am a villain; I have no honor and no heart. Tread Me under foot like a reptile. My misery is only what I deserve! Compassion is thrown away--isn't it?--on such a scoundrel as I am?"

I was sorely puzzled how to answer him. All that he had said against himself, I had thought of him in my own mind. And why not? He had behaved infamously--he was a fit object for righteous indignation. And yet--and yet--it is sometimes so very hard, however badly a man may have behaved, for women to hold out against forgiving him, when they know that a woman is at the bottom of it.

"Whatever I may have thought of you," I said, "it is still in your power, Nugent, to win back my old regard for you."

"Is it?" he answered scornfully. "I know better than that. You are not talking to Oscar now--you are talking to a man who has had some experience of women. I know how you all hold to your opinions because they are your opinions--without asking yourselves whether they are right or wrong. There are men who could understand me and pity me. No woman can do it. The best and cleverest among you don't know what love is--as a man feels it. It

isn't the frenzy with You that it is with Us. It acknowledges restraints in a woman--it bursts through everything in a man. It robs him of his intelligence, his honor, his self-respect--it levels him with the brutes--it debases him into idiocy--it lashes him into madness. I tell you I am not accountable for my own actions. The kindest thing you could do for me would be to shut me up in a madhouse. The best thing I could do for myself would be to cut my throat.--Oh, yes! this is a shocking way of talking, isn't it? I ought to struggle against it--as you say. I ought to summon my self-control. Ha! ha! ha! Here is a clever woman--here is an experienced woman. And yet--though she has seen me in Lucilla's company hundreds of times--she has never once discovered the signs of a struggle in me! From the moment when I first saw that heavenly creature, it has been one long fight against myself, one infernal torment of shame and remorse; and this clever friend of mine has observed so little and knows so little, that she can only view my conduct in one light--it is the conduct of a coward and a villain!"

He got up, and took a turn in the room. I was--naturally, I think--a little irritated by his way of putting it. A man assuming to know more about love than a woman! Was there ever such a monstrous perversion of the truth as that? I appeal to the women!

"You ought to be the last person to blame me," I said. "I had too high an opinion of you to suspect what was going on. I will never make the same mistake again--I promise you that!"

He came back, and stood still in front of me, looking me hard in the face.

"Do you really mean to say you saw nothing to set you thinking, on the day when I first met her?" he asked. "You were there in the room--didn't you see that she struck me dumb? Did you notice nothing suspicious at a later time? When I was suffering martyrdom, if I only looked at her--was there nothing to be seen in me which told its own tale?"

"I noticed that you were never at your ease with her," I replied. "But I liked you and trusted you--and I failed to understand it. That's all."

"Did you fail to understand everything that followed? Didn't I speak to her father? Didn't I try to hasten Oscar's marriage?"

It was true. He had tried.

"When we first talked of his telling Lucilla of the discoloration of his face, did I not agree with you that he ought to put himself right with her, in his own

interests?"

True again. Impossible to deny that he had sided with my view.

"When she all but found it out for herself, whose influence was used to make him own it? Mine! What did I do, when he tried to confess it, and failed to make her understand him? what did I do when she first committed the mistake of believing me to be the disfigured man?"

The audacity of that last question fairly took away my breath. "You cruelly helped to deceive her," I answered indignantly. "You basely encouraged your brother in his fatal policy of silence."

He looked at me with an angry amazement on his side which more than equaled the angry amazement on mine.

"So much for the delicate perception of a woman!" he exclaimed. "So much for the wonderful tact which is the peculiar gift of the sex! You can see no motive but a bad motive in my sacrificing myself for Oscar's sake?"

I began to discern faintly that there might have been another than a bad motive for his conduct. But--well! I dare say I was wrong; I resented the tone he was taking with me; I would have owned I had made a mistake to anybody else in the world; I wouldn't own it to him. There!

"Look back for one moment," he resumed, in quieter and gentler tones. "See how hardly you have judged me! I seized the opportunity--I swear to you this is true--I seized the opportunity of making myself an object of horror to her, the moment I heard of the mistake that she had made. I felt in myself that I was growing less and less capable of avoiding her, and I caught at the chance of making her avoid me; I did that--and I did more! I entreated Oscar to let me leave Dimchurch. He appealed to me, in the name of our love for each other, to remain. I couldn't resist him. Where do you see signs of the conduct of a scoundrel in all this? Would a scoundrel have betrayed himself to you a dozen times over--as I did in that talk of ours in the summer-house? I remember saying in so many words, I wished I had never come to Dimchurch. What reason but one could there be for my saying that? How is it that you never even asked me what I meant?"

"You forget," I interposed, "that I had no opportunity of asking you. Lucilla interrupted us, and diverted my attention to other things. What do you mean by putting me on my defence in this way?" I went on, more and more irritated by the tone he was taking with me. "What right have you to judge

my conduct?"

He looked at me with a kind of vacant surprise.

"Have I been judging your conduct?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Perhaps I was thinking, if you had seen my infatuation in time you might have checked it in time. No!" he exclaimed, before I could answer him.

"Nothing could have checked it--nothing will cure it but my death. Let us try to agree. I beg your pardon if I have offended you. I am willing to take a just view of your conduct. Will you take a just view of mine?"

I tried hard to take a just view. Though I resented his manner of speaking to me, I nevertheless secretly felt for him, as I have confessed. Still I could not forget that he had attempted to attract to himself Lucilla's first look, on the day when she tried her sight--that he had personated his brother to Lucilla that very morning--that he had suffered his brother to go away heart-broken, a voluntary exile from all that he held dear. No! I could feel for him, but I could not take a just view of him. I sat down, and said nothing.

He returned to the question between us; treating me with the needful politeness, when he spoke next. For all that, he alarmed me, by what he now said, as he had not alarmed me yet.

"I repeat what I have already told you," he proceeded. "I am no longer accountable for what I do. If I know anything of myself, I believe it will be useless to trust me in the future. While I am capable of speaking the truth, let me tell it. Whatever happens at a later time--remember this, I have honestly made a clean breast of it to-night."

"Stop!" I cried. "I don't understand your reckless way of talking. Every man is accountable for what he does."

He checked me there by an impatient wave of his hand.

"Keep your opinion; I don't dispute it. You will see; you will see.--Madame Pratolungo, the day when we had that private talk of ours in the rectory summer-house, marks a memorable date in my calendar. My last honest struggle to be true to my poor Oscar ended with that day. The efforts I have made since then have been little better than mere outbreaks of despair. They have done nothing to help me against the passion that has become the

one feeling and the one misery of my life. Don't talk of resistance. All resistance stops at a certain point. Since the time I have told you of, my resistance has reached its limits. You have heard how I struggled against temptation, as long as I could resist it. I have only to tell you how I have yielded to it now."

The reckless, shameless composure with which he said that, began to set me against him once more. The perpetual shifts and contradictions in him, bewildered and irritated me. Quicksilver itself seemed to be less slippery to lay hold of than this man.

"Do you remember the day," he asked, "when Lucilla lost her temper, and received you so rudely at your visit to Browndown?"

I made a sign in the affirmative.

"You spoke, a little while since, of my personating Oscar to her. I personated him, on the occasion I have just mentioned, for the first time. You were present and heard me. Did you care to speculate on the motives which made me impose myself on her as my brother?"

"As well as I can remember," I answered, "I made the first guess that occurred to me. I thought you were indulging in a moment's mischievous amusement at Lucilla's expense.

"I was indulging the passion that consumed me! I longed to feel the luxury of her touching me and being familiar with me, under the impression that I was Oscar. Worse even than that, I wanted to try how completely I could impose on her--how easily I might marry her, if I could only deceive you all, and take her away somewhere by herself. The devil was in possession of me. I don't know how it might have ended, if Oscar had not come in, and if Lucilla had not burst out as she did. She distressed me--she frightened me--she gave me back again to my better self. I rushed, without stopping to prepare her, into the question of her restoration to sight--as the only way of diverting her mind from the vile advantage that I had taken of her blindness. That night, Madame Pratolungo, I suffered pangs of self-reproach and remorse which would even have satisfied you. At the very next opportunity that offered, I made my atonement to Oscar. I supported his interests; I even put the words he was to say to Lucilla into his lips.

"When?" I broke in. "Where? How?"

"When the two surgeons had left us. In Lucilla's sitting-room. In the heat of

the discussion whether she should submit to the operation at once--or whether she should marry Oscar first, and let Grosse try his experiment on her eyes at a later time. If you recall our conversation, you will remember that I did all I could to persuade Lucilla to marry my brother before Grosse tried his experiment on her sight. Quite useless! You threw all the weight of your influence into the opposite side of the scale. I failed. It made no difference. I had done what I had done in sheer despair: mere impulse--it didn't last. When the next temptation tried me, I behaved like a scoundrel--as you say."

"I have said nothing," I answered shortly.

"Very well--as you think, then. Did you suspect me at last--when we met in the village, yesterday? Surely, even your eyes must have seen through me on that occasion!"

I answered silently, by an inclination of my head. I had no wish to drift into another quarrel. Sorely as he was presuming on my endurance, I tried, in Lucilla's interests, to keep on friendly terms with him.

"You concealed it wonderfully well," he went on, "when I tried to find out whether you had, or had not discovered me. You virtuous people are not bad hands at deception, when it suits your interests to deceive. I needn't tell you what my temptation was yesterday. The first look of her eyes when they opened on the world; the first light of love and joy breaking on her heavenly face--what madness to expect me to let that look fall on another man, that light show itself to other eyes! No living being, adoring her as I adored her, would have acted otherwise than I did. I could have fallen down on my knees and worshipped Grosse, when he innocently proposed to me to take the very place in the room which I was determined to occupy. You saw what I had in my mind! You did your best--and did it admirably--to defeat me. Oh, you pattern people--you can be as shifty with your resources, when a cunning trick is to be played, as the worst of us! You saw how it ended. Fortune stood my friend at the eleventh hour; fortune can shine, like the sun, on the just and the unjust! I had the first look of her eyes! I felt the first light of love and joy in her face falling on me! I have had her arms round me, and her bosom on mine--"

I could endure it no longer.

"Open the door!" I said. "I am ashamed to be in the same room with you!"

"I don't wonder at it," he answered. "You may well be ashamed of me. I am

ashamed of myself."

There was nothing cynical in his tone, nothing insolent in his manner. The same man who had just gloried in that abominable way, in his victory over innocence and misfortune, now spoke and looked like a man who was honestly ashamed of himself. If I could only have felt convinced that he was mocking me, or playing the hypocrite with me, I should have known what to do. But I say again--impossible as it seems--he was, beyond all doubt, genuinely penitent for what he had said, the instant after he had said it! With all my experience of humanity, and all my practice in dealing with strange characters, I stopped mid-way between Nugent and the locked door, thoroughly puzzled.

"Do you believe me?" he asked.

"I don't understand you," I answered.

He took the key of the door out of his pocket, and put it on the table--close to the chair from which I had just risen.

"I lose my head when I talk of her, or think of her," he went on. "I would give everything I possess not to have said what I said just now. No language you can use is too strong to condemn it. The words burst out of me: if Lucilla herself had been present, I couldn't have controlled them. Go, if you like. I have no right to keep you here, after behaving as I have done. There is the key, at your service. Only think first, before you leave me. You had something to propose when you came in. You might influence me--you might shame me into behaving like an honorable man. Do as you please. It rests with you."

Which was I, a good Christian? or a contemptible fool? I went back once more to my chair, and determined to give him a last chance.

"That's kind," he said. "You encourage me; you show me that I am worth trying again. I had a generous impulse in this room, yesterday. It might have been something better than an impulse--if I had not had another temptation set straight in my way."

"What temptation?" I asked.

"Oscar's letter has told you: Oscar himself put the temptation in my way. You must have seen it."

"I saw nothing of the sort."

"Doesn't he tell you that I offered to leave Dimchurch for ever? I meant it. I saw the misery in the poor fellow's face, when Grosse and I were leading Lucilla out of the room. With my whole heart, I meant it. If he had taken my hand, and had said Good-bye, I should have gone. He wouldn't take my hand. He insisted on thinking it over by himself. He came back, resolved to make the sacrifice, on his side----"

"Why did you accept the sacrifice?"

"Because he tempted me."

"Tempted you?"

"Yes! What else can you call it--when he offered to leave me free to plead my own cause with Lucilla? What else can you call it--when he showed me a future life, which was a life with Lucilla? Poor, dear, generous fellow, he tempted me to stay when he ought to have encouraged me to go. How could I resist him? Blame the passion that has got me body and soul: don't blame me!"

I looked at the book on the table--the book that he had been reading when I entered the room. These sophisticated confidences of his were nothing but Rousseau at second hand. Good! If he talked false Rousseau, nothing was left for me but to talk genuine Pratolungo. I let myself go--I was just in the humour for it.

"How can a clever man like you impose on yourself in that way?" I said. "Your future with Lucilla? You have no future with Lucilla which is not shocking to think of. Suppose--you shall never do it, as long as I live--suppose you married her? Good heavens, what a miserable life it would be for both of you! You love your brother. Do you think you could ever really know a moment's peace, with one reflection perpetually forcing itself on your mind? 'I have cheated Oscar out of the woman whom he loved; I have wasted his life; I have broken his heart.' You couldn't look at her, you couldn't speak to her, you couldn't touch her, without feeling it all embittered by that horrible reproach. And she? What sort of wife would she make you, when she knew how you had got her? I don't know which of the two she would hate most--you or herself. Not a man would pass her in the street, who would not rouse the thought in her--'I wonder whether he has ever done anything as base as what my husband has done.' Not a married woman of her acquaintance, but would make her sick at heart with envy and regret.

'Whatever faults he may have, your husband hasn't won you as my husband won me.' You happy? Your married life endurable? Come! I have saved a few pounds, since I have been with Lucilla. I will lay you every farthing I possess, you two would be separated by mutual consent before you had been six months man and wife. Now, which will you do? Will you start for the Continent, or stay here? Will you bring Oscar back, like an honorable man? or let him go, and disgrace yourself for ever?"

His eyes sparkled; his color rose. He sprang to his feet, and unlocked the door. What was he going to do? To start for the Continent, or to turn me out of the house?

He called to the servant.

"James!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Make the house fast when Madame Pratolungo and I have left it. I am not coming back again."

"Sir!"

"Pack my portmanteau, and send it after me to-morrow, to Nagle's Hotel, London."

He closed the door again, and came back to me.

"You refused to take my hand when you came in," he said. "Will you take it now? I leave Browndown when you leave it; and I won't come back again till I bring Oscar with me.

"Both hands!" I exclaimed--and took him by both hands. I could say nothing more. I could only wonder whether I was waking or sleeping; fit to be put into an asylum, or fit to go at large?

"Come!" he said. "I will see you as far as the rectory gate.

"You can't go to-night," I answered. "The last train has left hours since."

"I can! I can walk to Brighton, and get a bed there, and leave for London to-morrow morning. Nothing will induce me to pass another night at Browndown. Stop! One question before I put the lamp out."

"What is it?"

"Did you do anything towards tracing Oscar, when you were in London to-day?"

"I went to a lawyer, and made what arrangements with him I could."

"Here is my pocket-book. Write me down his name and address."

I wrote them. He extinguished the lamp, and led me into the passage. The servant was standing there bewildered. "Good night, James. I am going to bring your master back to Browndown." With that explanation, he took up his hat and stick, and gave me his arm. The moment after, we were out in the dark valley, on our way to the village.

On the walk back to the rectory, he talked with a feverish volubility and excitement. Avoiding the slightest reference to the subject discussed at our strange and stormy interview, he returned, with tenfold confidence in himself, to his old boastful assertion of the great things he was going to do as a painter. The mission which called him to reconcile Humanity with Nature; the superb scale on which he proposed to interpret sympathetic scenery for the benefit of suffering mankind; the prime necessity of understanding him, not as a mere painter, but as Grand Consoler in Art--I had it all over again, by way of satisfying my mind as to his prospects and occupations in his future life. It was only when we stopped at the rectory-gate that he referred to what had passed between us--and even then, he only touched on the subject in the briefest possible way.

"Well?" he said. "Have I won back your old regard for me? Do you believe there is a fine side to be found in the nature of Nugent Dubourg? Man is a compound animal. You are a woman in ten thousand. Give me a kiss."

He kissed me, foreign fashion, on both cheeks.

"Now for Oscar!" he shouted cheerfully. He waved his hat, and disappeared in the darkness. I stood at the gate till the last rapid pit-pat of his feet died away in the silence of the night.

An indescribable depression seized on my spirits. I began to doubt him again, the instant I was alone.

"Is there a time coming," I asked myself, "when all that I have done to-night

must be done over again?"

I opened the rectory-gate. Mr. Finch intercepted me before I could get round to our side of the house. He held up before me, in solemn triumph, a manuscript of many pages.

"My Letter," he said. "A Letter of Christian remonstrance, to Nugent Dubourg."

"Nugent Dubourg has left Dimchurch."

With that reply, I told the rector in as few words as possible how my visit to Browndown had ended.

Mr. Finch looked at his letter. All those pages of eloquence written for nothing? No! In the nature of things, that could not possibly be. "You have done very well, Madame Pratulungo," he remarked, in his most patronizing manner. "Very well indeed, all things considered. But, I don't think I shall act wisely if I destroy this." He carefully locked up his manuscript, and turned to me again with a mysterious smile. "I venture to think," said Mr. Finch with mock humility, "My Letter will be wanted. Don't let me discourage you about Nugent Dubourg. Only let me say:--Is he to be trusted?"

It was said by a fool: it would never have been said at all, if he had not written his wonderful letter. Still, it echoed, with a painful fidelity, the misgiving secretly present at that moment in my own mind--and, more yet, it echoed the misgiving in Nugent's mind, the doubt of himself which his own lips had confessed to me in so many words. I wished the rector good night, and went upstairs.

Lucilla was in bed and asleep, when I softly opened her door.

After looking for awhile at her lovely peaceful face, I was obliged to turn away. It was time I left the bedside, when the sight of her only made my spirits sink lower and lower. As I cast my last look at her before I closed the door, Mr. Finch's ominous question forced itself on me again. In spite of myself, I said to myself--

"Is he to be trusted?"