

CHAPTER THE THIRTY-NINTH

She Learns to See

WITH the new morning, certain reflections found their way into my mind which were not of the most welcome sort. There was one serious element of embarrassment in my position towards Lucilla, which had not discovered itself to me when Nugent and I parted at the rectory gate.

Browndown was now empty. In the absence of both the brothers, what was I to say to Lucilla when the false Oscar failed to pay her his promised visit that day?

In what a labyrinth of lies had the first fatal suppression of the truth involved us all! One deception after another had been forced on us; one disaster after another had followed retributively as the result--and, now that I was left to deal single-handed with the hard necessities of our position, no choice seemed left to me but to go on deceiving Lucilla still! I was weary of it and ashamed of it. At breakfast-time, I evaded all further discussion of the subject, after I had first ascertained that Lucilla did not expect her visitor before the afternoon. For some time after breakfast, I kept her at the piano. When she wearied of music, and began to talk of Oscar once more, I put on my hat, and set forth on a domestic errand (of the kind usually entrusted to Zillah), solely for the purpose of keeping out of the way, and putting off to the last moment the hateful necessity of telling more lies. The weather stood my friend. It threatened to rain; and Lucilla, on that account, refrained from proposing to accompany me.

My errand took me to a farm-house on the road which led to Brighton. After settling my business, I prolonged my walk, though the rain was already beginning to fall. I had nothing on me that would spoil; and, in my present frame of mind, a wet gown was a preferable alternative to returning to the rectory.

After I had walked about a mile further on, the solitude of the road was enlivened by the appearance of an open carriage approaching me from the direction of Brighton. The hood was up to protect the person inside from the rain. The person looked out as I passed, and stopped the carriage in a voice which I instantly recognized as the voice of Grosse. Our gallant oculist insisted (in the state of the weather) on my instantly taking shelter by his side and returning with him to the house.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," I said. "I thought you had arranged not to see Lucilla again till the end of the week."

Grosse's eyes glared at me through his spectacles with a dignity and gravity worthy of Mr. Finch himself.

"Shall I tell you something?" he said. "You see sitting at your side a lost surgeon-optic. I shall die soon. Put on my tombs, if you please, The malady which killed this German mans was--Lofely Feench. When I am away from her--gif me your sympathies: I so much want it--I sweat with anxiousness for young Miss. Your damn-mess-fix about those two brodders is a sort of perpetual blisters on my mind. Instead of snoring peaceably all night in my nice big English beds, I roll wide awake on my pillows, fidgeting for Feench. I am here to-day before my time. For what? For to try her eyes--you think? Goot Madam, you think wrong! It is not her eyes which troubles me. Her eyes will do. It is You--and the odders at your rectory-place. You make me nervous-anxious about my patients. I am afraid some of you will let the mess-fix of those brodder-twins find its way to her pretty ears, and turn her poor little mind topsy-turvies when I am not near to see to it in time. Will you let her be comfortable-easy for two months more? Ach Gott! if I could only be certain-sure of that, I might leave those weak new eyes of hers to cure themselves, and go my ways back to London again."

I had intended to remonstrate with him pretty sharply for taking Lucilla to Browndown. After what he had now said, it was useless to attempt anything of that sort--and doubly useless to hope that he would let me extricate myself from my difficulties by letting me tell her the truth.

"Of course you are the best judge," I said. "But you little know what these precautions of yours cost the unfortunate people who are left to carry them out."

He took me up sharply at those words.

"You shall judge for yourself," he said, "if it is not worth the cost. If her eyes satisfy me--Feench shall learn to see to-day. You shall stand by, you obstinate womans, and judge if it is goot to add shock and agitation to the exhaustions and irritabilities and bedevilments of all sorts which our poor Miss must suffer in learning to see, after being blind for all her life. No more of it now, till we get to the rectory-place." By way of changing the subject for the present, he put a question to me which I felt it necessary to answer with some caution. "How is my nice boys?--my bright-clever Nugent?" he asked.

"Very well."

There I stopped, not feeling at all sure of the ground I was treading on.

"Mind this!" Grosse went on. "My bright-boy-Nugent keeps her comfortable-easy. My bright-boy-Nugent is worth all the rest of you togedder. I insist on his making his visits to young Miss at the rectory-place, in spite of that windy-talky-puff-bag-Feench-father of hers. I say positively--Nugent shall come into the house."

There was no help for it now. I was obliged to tell him that Nugent had left Browndown, and that I was the person who had sent him away.

For a moment, I was really in doubt whether the skilled hand of the great surgeon would not be ignobly employed in boxing my ears. No perversion of spelling can possibly report the complicated German-English jargon in which his fury poured itself out on my devoted head. Let it be enough to say that he declared Nugent's abominable personation of his brother to be vitally important--so long as Oscar was absent--to his successful treatment of the sensitive and excitable patient whom we had placed under his care. I vainly assured him that Nugent's object in leaving Dimchurch was to set matters right again by bringing his brother back. Grosse flatly declined to allow himself to be influenced by any speculative consideration of that sort. He said (and swore) that my meddling had raised a serious obstacle in his way, and that nothing but his own tender regard for Lucilla prevented him from "turning the coachmans back," and leaving us henceforth to shift for ourselves.

When we reached the rectory gate, he had cooled a little. As we crossed the garden, he reminded me that I stood pledged to be present when the bandage was taken off.

"Now mind!" he said. "You are going to see, if it is goot or bad to tell her that she has had those nice white arms of hers round the wrong brodder. You are going to tell me afterwards, if you dare say to her, in plain English words, 'Blue-Face is the man.'"

We found Lucilla in the sitting-room. Grosse briefly informed her that he had nothing particular to occupy him in London, and that he had advanced the date of his visit on that account. "You want something to do, my lofe, on this soaky-rainy day. Show Papa-Grosse what you can do with your eyes, now you have got them back again." With those words, he unfastened the

bandage, and, taking her by the chin, examined her eyes--first without his magnifying glass; then with it.

"Am I going on well?" she asked anxiously.

"Famous-well! You go on (as my goot friends say in America) first-class. Now use your eyes for yourself. Gif one lofing look to Grosse first. Then--see! see! see!"

There was no mistaking the tone in which he spoke to her.

He was not only satisfied about her eyes--he was triumphant. "Soh!" he grunted, turning to me. "Why is Mr. Sebrights not here to look at this?"

I eagerly approached Lucilla. There was still a little dimness left in her eyes. I noticed also that they moved to and fro restlessly, and (at times) wildly. But, oh, the bright change in her! the new life of beauty which the new sense had bestowed on her already! Her smile, always charming, now caught light from her lips, and spread its gentle fascination over all her face. It was impossible not to long to kiss her. I advanced to congratulate, to embrace her. Grosse stepped forward, and checked me.

"No," he said. "Walk your ways to the odder end of the rooms--and let us see if she can go to you."

Like all other people, knowing no more of the subject than I knew, I had no idea of the pitiably helpless manner in which the restored sense of sight struggles to assert itself, in persons who have been blind for life. In such cases, the effort of the eyes that are first learning to see, is like the effort of the limbs when a child is first learning to walk. But for Grosse's odd way of taking it, the scene which I was now to witness would have been painful in the last degree. My poor Lucilla--instead of filling me with joy, as I had anticipated--would I really believe have wrung my heart, and have made me burst out crying.

"Now!" said Grosse, laying one hand on Lucilla's arm, while he pointed to me with the other. "There she stands. Can you go to her?"

"Of course I can!"

"I lay you a bet-wager you can not! Ten thousand pounds to six pennies. Done-done. Now try!"

She answered by a little gesture of defiance, and took three hasty steps forward. Bewildered and frightened, she stopped suddenly at the third step--before she had advanced half the way from her end of the room to mine.

"I saw her here," she said, pointing down to the spot on which she was standing; and appealing piteously to Grosse. "I see her now--and I don't know where she is! She is so near, I feel as if she touched my eyes--and yet" (she advanced another step, and clutched with her hands at the empty air)--"and yet, I can't get near enough to take hold of her. Oh! what does it mean? what does it mean?"

"It means--pay me my six pennies!" said Grosse. "The wager-bet is mine!"

She resented his laughing at her, with an obstinate shake of her head, and an angry knitting of her pretty eyebrows.

"Wait a little," she said. "You shan't win quite so easily as that. I will get to her yet!"

She came straight to me in a moment--just as easily as I could have gone to her myself if I had tried.

"Another wager-bet!" cried Grosse, still standing behind her, and calling to me. "Twenty thousand pounds this time to a fourpennies-bit. She has shut her eyes to get to you. Hey!"

It was true--she had blindfolded herself! With her eyes closed, she could measure to a hair's breadth the distance which, with her eyes opened, she was perfectly incompetent to calculate! Detected by both of us, she sat down, poor dear, with a sigh of despair. "Was it worth while," she said to me sadly, "to go through the operation for this?"

Grosse joined us at our end of the room.

"All in good time," he said. "Patience--and these helpless eyes of yours will learn. So! I shall begin to teach them now. You have got your own notions--hey?--about this colors and that? When you were blind, did you think what would be your favorite colors if you could see? You did? Which colors is it? Tell me. Come!"

"White first," she answered. "Then scarlet."

Grosse paused, and considered.

"White, I understand," he said. "White is the fancy of a young girls. But why scarlets? Could you see scarlets when you were blind?"

"Almost," she answered, "if it was bright enough. I used to feel something pass before my eyes when scarlet was shown to me."

"In these cataracts-cases, it is constantly scarlets that they almost see," muttered Grosse to himself. "There must be reason for this--and I must find him." He went on with his questions to Lucilla. "And the colors you hate most--which is he?"

"Black."

Grosse nodded his head approvingly. "I thought so," he said. "It is always black that they hate. For this also there must be reason--and I must find him."

Having expressed that resolution, he approached the writing-table, and took a sheet of paper out of the case, and a circular pen-wiper of scarlet cloth out of the inkstand. After that, he looked about him; waddled back to the other end of the room; and fetched the black felt hat in which he had traveled from London. He ranged the hat, the paper, and the pen-wiper in a row. Before he could put his next question to her, she pointed to the hat with a gesture of disapproval.

"Take it away," she said. "I don't like that."

Grosse stopped me before I could speak.

"Wait a little," he whispered in my ear. "It is not quite so wonderful as you think. These blind peoples, when they first see, have all alike the same hatred of anything what is dark." He turned to Lucilla. "Say," he asked. "Is your favorite colors among these things here?"

She passed by the hat in contempt; looked at the pen-wiper, and put it down; looked at the sheet of paper, and put it down; hesitated--and again shut her eyes.

"No!" cried Grosse. "I won't have it! How dare you blind yourself, in the presence of Me? What! I give you back your sights, and you go shut your eyes. Open them--or I will put you in the corner like a naughty girls. Your favorite colors? Now, now, now!"

She opened her eyes (very unwillingly), and looked once more at the pen-wiper and the paper.

"I see nothing as bright as my favorite colors here," she said.

Grosse held up the sheet of paper, and pressed the question without mercy.

"What! is white, whiter than this?"

"Fifty thousand times whiter than that!"

"Goot. Now mind! This paper is white," (he snatched her handkerchief out of her apron-pocket). "This handkerchief is white, too; whitest of white, both of them. First lesson, my lofe! Here in my hands is your favorite colors, in the time when you were blind."

"Those!" she exclaimed, pointing to the paper and the handkerchief, with a look of blank disappointment as he dropped them on the table. She turned over the pen-wiper and the hat, and looked round at me. Grosse, waiting to try another experiment, left it to me to answer. The result, in both cases, was the same as in the cases of the sheet of paper and the handkerchief. Scarlet was not half as red--black, not one-hundredth part as black--as her imagination had figured them to her, in the days when she was blind. Still, as to this last color--as to black--she could feel some little encouragement. It had affected her disagreeably (just as poor Oscar's face had affected her), though she had not actually known it for the color that she disliked. She made an effort, poor child, to assert herself, against her merciless surgeon-teacher. "I didn't know it was black," she said. "But I hated the sight of it, for all that."

She tried, as she spoke, to toss the hat on to a chair, standing close by her--and threw it instead, high above the back of the chair, against the wall, at least six feet away from the object at which she had aimed. "I am a helpless fool!" she burst out; her face flushing crimson with mortification. "Don't let Oscar see me! I can't bear the thought of making myself ridiculous before him! He is coming here," she added, turning to me entreatingly. "Manage to make some excuse for his not seeing me till later in the day."

I promised to find the excuse--all the more readily, that I now saw an unexpected chance of reconciling her in some degree (so long as she was learning to see) to the blank produced in her life by Oscar's absence.

She addressed herself again to Grosse.

"Go on!" she said impatiently. "Teach me to be something better than an idiot--or put the bandage on, and blind me again. My eyes are of no use to me! Do you hear?" she cried furiously, taking him by his broad shoulders and shaking him with all her might--"my eyes are of no use to me!"

"Now! now! now!" cried Grosse. "If you don't keep your tempers, you little spitfire, I will teach you nothing." He took up the sheet of paper and the pen-wiper; and, forcing her to sit down, placed them together before her, in her lap.

"Do you know one thing?" he went on. "Do you know what is meant by an objects which is square? Do you know what is meant by an objects which is round?"

Instead of answering him, she appealed indignantly to my opinion.

"Is it not monstrous," she asked, "to hear him put such a question to me as that? Do I know round from square? Oh, how cruelly humiliating! Don't tell Oscar! don't tell Oscar!"

"If you know," persisted Grosse, "you can tell me. Look at those two things in your lap. Are they both round? or both square? or is one round? and the odder square? Look now, and tell me."

She looked--and said nothing.

"Well?" continued Grosse.

"You put me out, standing there staring at me through your horrid spectacles!" she said irritably. "Don't look at me, and I will tell you directly."

Grosse turned his head my way, with his diabolical grin; and signed to me to keep watch on her, in his place.

The instant his back was turned, she shut her eyes, and ran over the paper and the pen-wiper with the tips of her fingers!

"One is round and one is square," she answered, cunningly opening her eyes again, just in time to bear critical inspection when Grosse turned round towards her once more.

He took the paper and the pen-wiper out of her hands; and (thoroughly understanding the trick she had played him) changed them for a bronze saucer and a book. "Which is round? and which is square of these?" he asked, holding them up before her.

She looked first at one, and then at the other--plainly incapable (with only her eyes to help her) of answering the question.

"I put you out--don't I?" said Grosse. "You can't shut your eyes, my lovely Feench, while I am looking--can you?"

She turned red--then pale again. I began to be afraid she would burst out crying. Grosse managed her to perfection. The tact of this rough, ugly, eccentric old man was the most perfect tact I have ever met with.

"Shut your eyes," he said soothingly. "It is the right ways to learn. Shut your eyes, and take them in your hands, and tell me which is round and which is square in that way first."

She told him directly.

"Goot! now open your eyes, and see for yourself it is the saucers you have got in your right hand, and the books you have got in your left. You see? Goot again! Put them back on the table now. What shall we do next?"

"May I try if I can write?" she asked eagerly. "I do so want to see if I can write with my eyes instead of my finger."

"No! Ten thousand times no! I forbid reading; I forbid writing, yet. Come with me to the window. How do these most troublesome eyes of yours do at a distance?"

While we had been trying our experiment with Lucilla, the weather had brightened again. The clouds were parting; the sun was coming out; the bright gaps of blue in the sky were widening every moment; the shadows were traveling grandly over the windy slopes of the hills. Lucilla lifted her hands in speechless admiration as the German threw open the window, and placed her face to face with the view.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "don't speak to me! don't touch me!--let me enjoy it! There is no disappointment here. I have never thought, I have never dreamed, of anything half so beautiful as this!"

Grosse looked at me, and silently pointed to her. She had turned pale--she was trembling in every limb, overwhelmed by her own ecstatic sense of the glory of the sky and the beauty of the earth, as they now met her view for the first time. I penetrated the surgeon's object in directing my attention to her. "See" (he meant to say), "what a delicately-organized creature we have to deal with! Is it possible to be too careful in handling such a sensitive temperament as that?" Understanding him only too well, I also trembled when I thought of the future. Everything now depended on Nugent. And Nugent's own lips had told me that he could not depend on himself!

It was a relief to me when Grosse interrupted her.

She pleaded hard to be allowed to stay at the window a little longer. He refused to allow it. Upon that she flew instantly into the opposite extreme. "I am in my own room, and I am my own mistress," she said angrily. "I insist on having my own way." Grosse was ready with his answer.

"Take your own ways; fatigue those weak new eyes of yours--and to-morrow, when you try to look out of window, you will not be able to see at all." This reply terrified her into instant submission. She assisted in replacing the bandage with her own hands. "May I go away to my own room?" she asked, with the simplicity of a child. "I have seen such beautiful sights--and I do so want to think of them by myself."

The medical adviser instantly granted the patient's request. Any proceeding which tended to compose her, was a proceeding of which he highly approved.

"If Oscar comes," she whispered, as she passed me on her way to the door, "mind I hear of it! and mind you don't tell him of the mistakes I have made!" She paused for a moment, thinking. "I don't understand myself," she said. "I never was so happy in my life. And yet I feel almost ready to cry!" She turned towards Grosse. "Come here, papa. You have been very good to me to-day. I will give you a kiss." She laid her hands lightly on his shoulders; kissed his lined and wrinkled cheek; gave me a little squeeze round the waist--and left us. Grosse turned sharply to the window, and used his huge silk handkerchief for a purpose to which (I suspect) it had not been put for many a long year past.