

## CHAPTER THE FORTIETH

Traces of Nugent

"MADAME PRATOLUNGO!"

"Herr Grosse?"

He put his handkerchief back into his pocket, and turned round to me from the window with his face composed again, and his tea-caddy snuff-box in his hand.

"Now you have seen for your own self," he said, with an emphatic rap on the box, "do you dare tell that sweet girls which of them it is that has gone his ways and left her for ever?"

It is not easy to find a limit to the obstinacy of women--when men expect them to acknowledge themselves to have been wrong. After what I had seen, I no more dared tell her than he did. I was only too obstinate to acknowledge it to him--just yet.

"Mind this!" he went on. "Whether you shake her with frights, or whether you heat her with rages, or whether you wound her with griefs--it all goes straight the same to those weak new eyes of hers. They are so weak and so new, that I must ask once more for my beds here to-night, for to see to-morrow if I have not already tried them too much. Now, for the last time of asking, have you got the abominable courage in you to tell her the truth?"

He had found my limit at last. I was obliged to own (heartily as I disliked doing it) that there was, for the present, no choice left but mercifully to conceal the truth. Having gone this length I next attempted to consult him as to the safest manner in which I could account to Lucilla for Oscar's absence. He refused (as a man) to recognize the slightest necessity for giving me (as a woman) any advice on a question of evasions and excuses. "I have not lived all my years in the world, without learning something," he said. "When it comes to walking upon eggshells and telling fips, the womens have nothing to learn from the mens.--Will you take a little stroll-walk with me in the garden? I have one odder thing to say to you: and I am hungry and thirsty both togedder--for This."

He produced "This," in the form of his pipe. We left the room at once for our

stroll in the garden.

Having solaced himself with his first mouthful of tobacco-smoke, he startled me by announcing that he meant to remove Lucilla forthwith from Dimchurch to the sea-side. In doing this, he was actuated by two motives--first, the medical motive of strengthening her constitution: second, the personal motive of preserving her from making painful discoveries by placing her out of reach of the gossip of the rectory and the village. Grosse had the lowest opinion of Mr. Finch and his household. His dislike and distrust of the rector, in particular, knew no bounds: he characterized the Pope of Dimchurch as an Ape with a long tongue, and a man-and-monkey capacity for doing mischief. Ramsgate was the watering-place which he had fixed on. It was at a safe distance from Dimchurch; and it was near enough to London to enable him to visit Lucilla frequently. The one thing needed was my co-operation in the new plan. If I was at liberty to take charge of Lucilla, he would speak to the Ape with the long tongue; and we might start for Ramsgate before the end of the week.

Was there anything to prevent me from carrying out the arrangement proposed?

There was nothing to prevent me. My one other anxiety apart from Lucilla--anxiety about good Papa--had now, for some time, been happily set at rest. Letter after letter from my sisters in France, brought me always the same cheering news. My evergreen parent had at last discovered that he was no longer in the first bloom of his youth. He had resigned to his juniors, with pathetic expressions of regret, the making of love and the fighting of duels. Ravaged by past passions, this dear innocent had now found a refuge from swords, pistols, and the sex, in collecting butterflies and playing on the guitar. I was free wholly to devote myself to Lucilla; and I honestly rejoiced in the prospect before me. Alone with her, and away from the rectory (where there was always danger of gossip reaching her ears) I could rely on myself to protect her from harm in the present, and to preserve her for Oscar in the future. With all my heart I agreed to the arrangements as Grosse proposed them. When we parted in the garden, he went round to the rector's side of the house to announce (in his medical capacity) the decision at which he had arrived--while I, on my side, went back to Lucilla to make the best excuses that I could invent for Oscar, and to prepare her for our speedy removal from Dimchurch.

"Gone, without coming to say good-bye! Gone, without even writing to me!"

There was the first impression I produced on her, when I had done my best to account harmlessly for Oscar's absence. I had, as I thought, taken the shortest and simplest way out of the difficulty, by merely inverting the truth. In other words, by telling her that Nugent had got into some serious embarrassment abroad, and that Oscar had been called away at a moment's notice, to follow him and help him. It was in vain that I reminded her of Oscar's well-known horror of leave-takings of all kinds; in vain that I represented the urgency of the matter as leaving him no alternative but to confide his excuses and his farewells to me; in vain that I promised for him that he would write to her at the first opportunity. She listened, without conviction. The more perseveringly I tried to account for it, the more perseveringly she dwelt on Oscar's unaccountable disregard of her claims on his consideration for her. As for our journey to Ramsgate, it was impossible to interest her in the subject. I gave it up in despair.

"Surely Oscar has left some address at which I can write to him?" she said.

I could only answer that he was not sure enough of his movements to be able to do that before he went away.

"It is more provoking than you think," she went on. "I believe Oscar is afraid to bring his unfortunate brother into my presence. The blue face startled me when I saw it, I know. But I have quite got over that. I feel none of the absurd terror of the poor man which I felt when I was blind. Now that I have seen for myself what he is really like, I can feel for him. I wanted to tell Oscar this--I wanted to say that he might bring his brother to live with us if he liked--I wanted to prevent (just what has happened,) his going away from me when he wishes to see his brother. You are using me very hardly among you; and I have some reason to complain of it."

While she was talking in this mortifying manner, I felt some consolation nevertheless. Oscar's disfigured complexion would not be the terrible obstacle in the way of his restoration to Lucilla that I had feared. All the comfort which this reflection could give, I wanted badly enough. There was no open hostility towards me on Lucilla's part--but there was a coolness which I found more distressing to bear than hostility itself. I breakfasted in bed the next morning, and only rose towards noon--just in time to say good-bye to Grosse before he returned to London.

He was in high good spirits about his patient. Her eyes were the better instead of the worse for the exertion to which he had subjected them on the previous day. The bracing air of Ramsgate was all that was wanting to

complete the success of the operation. Mr. Finch had started objections, all turning on the question of expense. But with a daughter who was her own mistress, and who had her own fortune, his objections mattered nothing. By the next day, or the day after at latest, we were to start for Ramsgate. I promised to write to our good surgeon as soon as we were established; and he engaged on his side, to visit us immediately after. "Let her use her eyes for two goot hours every day," said Grosse, at parting. "She may do what she likes with them--except that she must not peep into books, or take up pens, till I come to you at Ramsgate. It is most wonderful-beautiful to see how those new eyes of hers do get along. When I next meet goot Mr. Sebrights--hey! how I shall cock-crow over that spick-span respectable man!"

I felt a little nervous as to how the day would pass--when the German left me alone with Lucilla.

To my amazement, she not only met me with the needful excuses for her behavior on the previous day, but showed herself to be perfectly resigned to the temporary loss of Oscar's society. It was she (not I) who remarked that he could not have chosen a better time for being away from her, than the humiliating time when she was learning to distinguish between round and square. It was she (not I) who welcomed the little journey to Ramsgate as a pleasant change in her dull life, which would help to reconcile her to Oscar's absence. In brief, if she had actually received a letter from Oscar, relieving her of all anxiety about him, her words and looks could hardly have offered a completer contrast than they now showed to her words and looks of the previous day.

If I had noticed no other alteration in her than this welcome change for the better, my record of the day would have ended here, as the record of unmixed happiness.

But, I grieve to say, I have something unpleasant to add. While she was making her excuses to me, and speaking in the sensible and satisfactory terms which I have just repeated, I noticed a curious underlying embarrassment in her manner, entirely unlike any previous embarrassment which had ever intruded itself between us. And, stranger still, on the first occasion when Zillah came into the room, while I was in it, I observed that Lucilla's embarrassment was reflected (when the old woman spoke to me) in the face and manner of Lucilla's nurse.

But one conclusion could possibly follow from what I saw:--they were both concealing something from me; and they were both more or less ashamed of what they were doing.

Somewhere--not very far back in these pages--I have said of myself that I am not by nature a woman who is easily ready to suspect others. On this very account, when I find suspicion absolutely forced on me--as it was now--I am apt to fly into the opposite extreme. In the present case, I fixed on the person to suspect--all the more readily from having been slow to suspect him in bygone days. "In some way or other," I said to myself, "Nugent Dubourg is at the bottom of this."

Was he communicating with her privately, in the name and in the character of Oscar?

The bare idea of it hurried me headlong into letting her know that I had noticed the change in her.

"Lucilla!" I said. "Has anything happened?"

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"I fancy I see some change----" I began.

"I don't understand you," she answered, walking away from me as she spoke.

I said no more. If our intimacy had been less close and less affectionate, I might have openly avowed to her what was passing in my mind. But how could I say to Lucilla, You are deceiving me? It would have been the end of our sisterhood--the end of our friendship. When confidence is withdrawn between two people who love each other--everything is withdrawn. They are on the footing of strangers from that moment, and must stand on ceremony. Delicate minds will understand why I accepted the check she had administered to me, and said no more.

I went into the village alone. Managing matters so as to excite no surprise, I contrived to have a little gossip about Nugent with Gootheridge at the inn, and with the servant at Browndown. If Nugent had returned secretly to Dimchurch, one of those two men, in our little village, must almost certainly have seen him. Neither of them had seen him.

I inferred from this that he had not tried to communicate with her personally. Had he attempted it (more cunningly and more safely) by letter?

I went back to the rectory. It was close on the hour which I had appointed

with Lucilla--now that the responsibility rested on my shoulders--for allowing her to use her eyes. On taking off the bandage, I noticed a circumstance which confirmed the conclusion at which I had already arrived. Her eyes deliberately avoided looking into mine. Suppressing as well as I could the pain which this new discovery caused me, I repeated Grosse's words, prohibiting her from attempting to look into a book, or to use a pen, until he had seen her again.

"There is no need for him to forbid me to do that," she said.

"Have you attempted it already?" I inquired.

"I looked into a little book of engravings," she answered. "But I could distinguish nothing. The lines all mingled together and swam before my eyes."

"Have you tried to write?" I asked next. (I was ashamed of myself for laying that trap for her--although the serious necessity of discovering whether she was privately in correspondence with Nugent, might surely have excused it?)

"No," she replied. "I have not tried to write."

She changed color when she made that answer. It is necessary to own that, in putting my question, I was too much excited to call to mind, what I should have remembered in a calmer state. There was no necessity for her trying to use her eyes--even if she was really carrying on a correspondence which she wished to keep secret from me. Zillah had been in the habit of reading her letters to her, before I appeared at the rectory; and she could write short notes (as I have already mentioned) by feeling her way on the paper with her finger. Besides, having learnt to read by touch (that is to say with raised characters), just as she had learnt to write--even if her eyes had been sufficiently recovered to enable her to distinguish small objects, nothing but practice could have taught her to use them for purposes of correspondence.

These considerations, though they did not strike me at the time, occurred to me later in the day, and altered my opinion to a certain extent. I now interpreted the change of color which I had noticed in her as the outward sign of suspicion on her side--suspicion that I had a motive of my own in interrogating her. For the rest, my doubts of Nugent remained unmoved. Try as I might, I could not divest my mind of the idea that he was playing me false, and that in one way or another he had contrived, not only to communicate with Lucilla, but to persuade her to keep me in ignorance of

what he had done.

I deferred to the next day any attempt at making further discoveries.

The last thing at night, I had a momentary impulse to question Zillah. Reflection soon checked it. My experience of the nurse's character told me that she would take refuge in flat denial--and would then inform her mistress of what had happened. I knew enough of Lucilla to know (after what had already passed between us) that a quarrel with me would follow. Things were bad enough already, without making them worse in that way. When the morning came, I resolved to keep a watchful eye on the village post-office, and on the movements of the nurse.

When the morning came, there was a letter for me from abroad.

The address was in the handwriting of one of my sisters. We usually wrote to each other at intervals of a fortnight or three weeks. This letter had followed its predecessor after an interval of less than one week. What did it mean? Good news or bad?

I opened the letter.

It enclosed a telegram, announcing that my poor dear father was lying dangerously wounded at Marseilles. My sisters had already gone to him: they implored me to follow them without one moment of needless delay. Is it necessary to tell the story of this horrible calamity? Of course it begins with a woman and an elopement. Of course it ends with a young man and a duel. Have I not told you already?--Papa was so susceptible; Papa was so brave. Oh, dear, dear! the old story over again. You have an English proverb: "What is bred in the bone--" etcetera, etcetera. Let us drop the veil. I mean, let us end the chapter.