

## CHAPTER THE FORTY-FIRST

### A Hard Time for Madame Pratolungo

WOULD I to have been prepared for the calamity which had now fallen on my sisters and myself? If I had looked my own experience of my poor father fairly in the face, would it not have been plain to me that the habits of a life were not likely to be altered at the end of a life? Surely--if I had exerted my intelligence--I might have foreseen that the longer his reformation lasted, the nearer he was to a relapse, and the more obviously probable it became that he would fail to fulfill the hopeful expectations which I had cherished of his conduct in the future? I grant it all. But where are the pattern people who can exert their intelligence--when their intelligence points to one conclusion, and their interests to another? Ah, my dear ladies and gentlemen, there is such a fine strong foundation of stupidity at the bottom of our common humanity--if we only knew it!

I could feel no hesitation--as soon as I had recovered myself--about what it was my duty to do. My duty was to leave Dimchurch in time to catch the fast mail-train from London to the Continent, at eight o'clock that night.

And leave Lucilla?

Yes! not even Lucilla's interests--dearly as I loved her; alarmed as I felt about her--were as sacred as the interests which called me to my father's bedside. I had some hours to spare before it would be necessary for me to leave her. All I could do was to employ those hours in taking the strictest precautions I could think of to protect her in my absence. I could not be long parted from her. One way or the other, the miserable doubt whether my father would live or die, would, at his age, soon be over.

I sent for her to see me in my room, and showed her my letter.

She was honestly grieved when she read it. For a moment--when she spoke her few words of sympathy--the painful constraint in her manner towards me passed away. It returned again, when I announced my intention of starting for France that day, and expressed the regret I felt at being obliged to defer our visit to Ramsgate for the present. She not only answered restrainedly (forming, as I fancied, some thought at the moment in her own mind)--she left me, with a commonplace excuse. "You must have much to think of in this sad affliction: I won't intrude on you any longer. If you want

me, you know where to find me." With no more than those words, she walked out of the room.

I never remember, at any other time, such a sense of helplessness and confusion as came over me when she had closed the door. I set to work to pack up the few things I wanted for the journey; feeling instinctively that if I did not occupy myself in doing something, I should break down altogether. Accustomed in all the other emergencies of my life, to decide rapidly, I was not even clear enough in my mind to see the facts as they were. As to resolving on anything, I was about as capable of doing that as the baby in Mrs. Finch's arms.

The effort of packing aided me to rally a little--but did no more towards restoring me to my customary tone of mind.

I sat down helplessly, when I had done; feeling the serious necessity of clearing matters up between Lucilla and myself, before I went away, and still as ignorant as ever how to do it. To my own indescribable disgust, I actually felt tears beginning to find their way into my eyes! I had just enough of Pratolungo's widow left in me to feel heartily ashamed of myself. Past vicissitudes and dangers, in the days of my republican life with my husband, had made me a sturdy walker--with a gypsy relish (like my little Jicks) for the open air. I snatched up my hat, and went out, to see what exercise would do for me.

I tried the garden. No! the garden was (for some inscrutable reason) not big enough. I had still some hours to spare. I tried the hills next.

Turning towards the left, and passing the church, I heard through the open windows the boom-boom of Reverend Finch's voice, catechizing the village children. Thank Heaven, he was out of my way at any rate! I mounted the hills, hurrying on as fast as I could. The air and the movement cleared my mind. After more than an hour of hard walking, I returned to the rectory, feeling like my old self again.

Perhaps, there were some dregs of irresolution still left in me. Or, perhaps, there was some enervating influence in my affliction, which made me feel more sensitively than ever the change in the relations between Lucilla and myself. Having, by this time, resolved to come to a plain explanation, before I left her unprotected at the rectory, I shrank, even yet, from confronting a possible repulse, by speaking to her personally. Taking a leaf out of poor Oscar's book, I wrote what I wanted to say to her in a note.

I rang the bell--once, twice. Nobody answered it.

I went to the kitchen. Zillah was not there. I knocked at the door of her bedroom. There was no answer: the bed-room was empty when I looked in. Awkward as it would be, I found myself obliged, either to give my note to Lucilla with my own hand, or to decide on speaking to her, after all.

I could not prevail on myself to speak to her. So I went to her room with my note, and knocked at the door.

Here again there was no reply. I knocked once more--with the same result. I looked in. There was no one in the room. On the little table at the foot of the bed, there lay a letter addressed to me. The writing was in Zillah's hand. But Lucilla had written her name in the corner in the usual way, to show that she had dictated the letter to her nurse. A load was lifted off my heart as I took it up. The same idea (I concluded) had occurred to her which had occurred to me. She too had shrunk from the embarrassment of a personal explanation. She too had written--and was keeping out of the way until her letter had spoken for her, and had united us again as friends before I left the house.

With these pleasant anticipations, I opened the letter. Judge what I felt when I found what it really contained.

"DEAR MADAME PRATOLUNGO,--You will agree with me, that it is very important, after what Herr Grosse has said about the recovery of my sight, that my visit to Ramsgate should not be delayed. As you are unable, through circumstances which I sincerely regret, to accompany me to the sea-side, I have determined to go to London to my aunt, Miss Batchford, and to ask her to be my companion instead of you. I have had experience enough of her sincere affection for me to be quite sure that she will gladly take the charge of me off your hands. As no time is to be lost, I start for London without waiting for your return from your walk to wish you good-bye. You so thoroughly understand the necessity of dispensing with formal farewells, in cases of emergency, that I am sure you will not feel offended at my taking leave of you in this way. With best wishes for your father's recovery, believe me,

"Yours very truly,

"LUCILLA.

"P. S.--You need be under no apprehension about me. Zillah goes with me as far as London; and I shall communicate with Herr Grosse when I arrive at my aunt's house."

But for one sentence in it, I should most assuredly have answered this cruel letter by instantly resigning my situation as Lucilla's companion.

The sentence to which I refer, contained the words which cast in my teeth the excuses that I had made for Oscar's absence. The sarcastic reference to my recent connection with a case of emergency, and to my experience of the necessity of dispensing with formal farewells, removed my last lingering doubts of Nugent's treachery. I now felt, not suspicion only, but positive conviction that he had communicated with her in his brother's name, and that he had contrived (by some means at which it was impossible for me to guess) so to work on Lucilla's mind--so to excite that indwelling distrust which her blindness had rooted in her character--as to destroy her confidence in me for the time being.

Arriving at this conclusion, I could still feel compassionately and generously towards Lucilla. Far from blaming my poor deluded sister-friend for her cruel departure and her yet crueller letter, I laid the whole fault on the shoulders of Nugent. Full as my mind was of my own troubles, I could still think of the danger that threatened Lucilla, and of the wrong that Oscar had suffered. I could still feel the old glow of my resolution to bring them together again, and still remember (and determine to pay) the debt I owed to Nugent Dubourg.

In the turn things had taken, and with the short time still at my disposal, what was I to do next? Assuming that Miss Batchford would accompany her niece to Ramsgate, how could I put the necessary obstacle in Nugent's way, if he attempted to communicate with Lucilla at the sea-side, in my absence?

It was impossible for me to decide this, unless I first knew whether Miss Batchford, as a member of the family, was to be confidentially informed of the sad position in which Oscar and Lucilla now stood towards each other.

The person to consult in this difficulty was the rector. As head of the household, and in my absence, the responsibility evidently rested with Reverend Finch.

I went round at once to the other side of the house. If Mr. Finch had returned to the rectory, after the catechizing was over, well and good. If not, I should be obliged to inquire in the village and seek him at the cottages of his parishioners. His magnificent voice relieved me from all anxiety on this head. The boom-boom which I had last heard in the church, I now heard again in the study.

When I entered the room, Mr. Finch was on his legs, highly excited; haranguing Mrs. Finch and the baby, ensconced as usual in a corner. My appearance on the scene diverted his flow of language, for the moment, so that it all poured itself out on my unlucky self. (If you recollect that the rector and Lucilla's aunt had been, from time immemorial, on the worst of terms--you will be prepared for what is coming. If you have forgotten this, look back at my sixth chapter and refresh your memory.)

"The very person I was going to send for!" said the Pope of Dimchurch. "Don't excite Mrs. Finch! Don't speak to Mrs. Finch! You shall hear why directly. Address yourself exclusively to Me. Be calm, Madame Pratolungo! you don't know what has happened. I am here to tell you."

I ventured to stop him: mentioning that Lucilla's letter had informed me of his daughter's sudden departure for her aunt's house. Mr. Finch waved away my answer with his hand, as something too infinitely unimportant to be worthy of a moment's notice.

"Yes! yes! yes!" he said. "You have a superficial acquaintance with the facts. But you are far from being aware of what my daughter's sudden removal of herself from my roof really means. Now don't be frightened, Madame Pratolungo! and don't excite Mrs. Finch! (How are you, my dear? how is the child? Both well? Thanks to an overruling Providence, both well.) Now, Madame Pratolungo, attend to this. My daughter's flight--I say flight advisedly: it is nothing less--my daughter's flight from my house means (I entreat you to be calm!)--means ANOTHER BLOW dealt at me by the family of my first wife. Dealt at me," repeated Mr. Finch; heating himself with the recollection of his old feud with the Batchfords--"Dealt at me by Miss Batchford (by Lucilla's aunt, Madame Pratolungo) through my unoffending second wife, and my innocent child.--Are you sure you are well, my dear? are you sure the infant is well? Thank Providence!--Concentrate your attention, Madame Pratolungo! Your attention is wandering. Prompted by Miss Batchford, my daughter has left my roof. Ramsgate is a mere excuse. And how has she left it? Not only without first seeing Me--I am Nobody! but without showing the slightest sympathy for Mrs. Finch's maternal situation. Attired in her traveling costume, my daughter precipitately entered (or to

use my wife's graphic expression 'bounced into') the nursery, while Mrs. Finch was administering maternal sustenance to the infant. Under circumstances which might have touched the heart of a bandit or a savage, my unnatural daughter (remind me, Mrs. Finch; we will have a little Shakespeare to-night; I will read King Lear), my unnatural daughter announced without one word of preparation that a domestic affliction would prevent you from accompanying her to Ramsgate.--Grieved, dear Madame Pratolungo, to hear of it. Cast your burden on Providence. Bear up, Mrs. Finch; bear up--Having startled my wife with this harrowing news, my daughter next shocked her by declaring that she was going to leave her father's roof, without waiting to bid her father good-bye. The catching of a train, you will observe, was (no doubt at Miss Batchford's instigation) of more importance than the parental embrace or the pastoral blessing. Leaving a message of apology for Me, my heartless child (I use Mrs. Finch's graphic language again--you have fair, very fair powers of expression, Mrs. Finch)--my heartless child 'bounced out' of the nursery to catch her train; having, for all she knew, or cared, administered a shock to my wife which might have soured the fountain of maternal sustenance at its source. There is where the Blow falls, Madame Pratolungo! How do I know that acid disturbance is not being communicated at this moment, instead of wholesome nourishment, between mother and child? I shall prepare you an alkaline draught, Mrs. Finch, to be taken after meals. Don't speak; don't move! Give me your pulse. I hold Miss Batchford accountable, Madame Pratolungo, for whatever happens--my daughter is a mere instrument in the hands of my first wife's family. Give me your pulse, Mrs. Finch. I don't like your pulse. Come up--stairs directly. A recumbent position, and another warm bath--under Providence, Madame Pratolungo!--may parry the Blow. Would you kindly open the door, and pick up Mrs. Finch's handkerchief? Never mind the novel--the handkerchief."

I seized my first opportunity of speaking again, while Mr. Finch was conducting his wife (with his arm round her waist) to the door--putting the question which I had been waiting to ask, in this cautious form:

"Do you propose to communicate, sir, either with your daughter or with Miss Batchford, while Lucilla is away from the rectory? My object in venturing to ask----"

Before I could state my object, Mr. Finch turned round (turning Mrs. Finch with him) and surveyed me from head to foot with a look of indignant astonishment.

"Is it possible you can see this double Wreck," said Mr. Finch, indicating his

wife and child, "and suppose that I would communicate or sanction communication of any sort, with the persons who are responsible for it?--My dear! Can you account for Madame Pratolungo's extraordinary question? Am I to understand (do you understand) that Madame Pratolungo is insulting me?"

It was useless to try to explain myself. It was useless for Mrs. Finch (who had made several abortive efforts to put in a word or two, on her own part) to attempt to pacify her husband. All the poor damp lady could do was to beg me to write to her from foreign parts. "I'm sorry you're in trouble; and I should really be glad to hear from you." Mrs. Finch had barely time to say those kind words--before the rector, in a voice of thunder, desired me to look at "that double Wreck, and respect it if I did not respect him"--and with that walked himself, his wife, and his baby out of the room.

Having gained the object which had brought me into the study, I made no attempt to detain him. The little sense the man possessed at the best of times, was completely upset by the shock which Lucilla's abrupt departure had inflicted on his high opinion of his own importance. That he would end in being reconciled to his daughter--before her next subscription to the household expenses fell due--was a matter of downright certainty. But, until that time came, I felt equally sure that he would vindicate his outraged dignity by declining to hold any communication, in person or in writing, with Ramsgate. During the short term of my absence from England, Miss Batchford would be left as ignorant of her niece's perilous position between the twin-brothers, as Lucilla herself. To know this was to have gained the information that I wanted. Nothing was left but to set my brains to work at once, and act on it.

How was I to act on it?

On the spur of the moment, I could see but one way. If Grosse pronounced Lucilla's recovery to be complete, before I returned from abroad, the best thing I could do would be to put Miss Batchford in a position to reveal the truth in my place--without running any risk of a premature discovery. In other words, without letting the old lady into the secret, before the time arrived at which it could be safely divulged.

This apparently intricate difficulty was easily overcome, by writing two letters (before I went away) instead of one.

The first letter I addressed to Lucilla. Without any reference to her behavior to me, I stated, in the fullest detail and with all needful delicacy, her

position between Oscar and Nugent: and referred her for proof of the truth of my assertions to her relatives at the rectory. "I leave it entirely to your discretion" (I added) "to write me an answer or not. Put the warning which I now give you to the proof; and if you wonder why it has been so long delayed, apply to Herr Grosse on whom the whole responsibility rests." There I ended; being resolved, after the wrong that Lucilla had inflicted on me, to leave my justification to facts. I confess I was too deeply wounded by her conduct--though I did lay all the blame of it on Nugent--to care to say a word in my own defence.

This letter sealed, I wrote next to Lucilla's aunt.

It was not an easy matter to address Miss Batchford. The contempt with which she regarded Mr. Finch's opinions in politics and religion, was more than matched by the strong aversion which she felt for my republican opinions. I have already mentioned, far back in these pages, that a dispute on politics between the Tory old lady and myself ended in a quarrel between us, which closed the doors of her house on me from that time forth. Knowing this, I ventured on writing to her nevertheless, because I also knew Miss Batchford to be (apart from her furious prejudices) a gentlewoman in the best sense of the word; devotedly attached to her niece, and quite as capable, when that devotion was appealed to, of doing justice to me (apart from my furious prejudices) as I was of doing justice to her. Writing in a tone of unaffected respect, and appealing to her forbearance to encourage mine, I requested her to hand my letter to Lucilla on the day when the surgeon reported that all further necessity for his attendance had ceased. In the interval before this happened, I entreated Miss Batchford, in her niece's interests, to consider my letter as a strictly private communication; adding, that my sufficient reason for venturing to make this condition would be found in my letter to Lucilla--which I authorized her aunt to read as soon as the time had arrived for opening it.

By this means I had, as I firmly believed, taken the only possible way of preventing Nugent Dubourg from doing any serious mischief in my absence.

Whatever his uncontrolled infatuation for Lucilla might lead him to do next, he could proceed to no serious extremities until Grosse pronounced her recovery to be complete. On the day when Grosse did that, she would receive my letter, and would discover for herself the abominable deception which had been practiced on her. As to attempting to find Nugent, no idea of doing this entered my mind. Wherever he might be, at home or abroad, it would be equally useless to appeal to his honor again. It would be degrading myself to speak to him or to trust him. To expose him to Lucilla the moment it became



possible was the one thing to be done. I was ready with my letters, one enclosed in the other, when good Mr. Gootheridge (with whom I had arranged previously) called to drive me to Brighton in his light cart. The chaise which he had for hire had been already used to make the same journey by Lucilla and the nurse, and had not yet been returned to the inn. I reached my train before the hour of starting, and arrived in London with a sufficient margin of time to spare.

Resolved to make sure that no possible mischance could occur, I drove to Miss Batchford's house, and saw the cabman give my letter into the servant's hands.

It was a bitter moment when I found myself pulling down my veil, in the fear that Lucilla might be at the window and see me! Nobody was visible but the man who answered the door. If pen, ink, and paper had been within my reach at the moment, I think I should have written to her on my own account, after all! As it was, I could only forgive her the injury she had done me. From the bottom of my heart, I forgave her, and longed for the blessed time which should unite us again. In the meanwhile, having done everything that I could to guard and help her, I was now free to give to Oscar all the thoughts that I could spare from my poor misguided father.

Being bound for the Continent, I determined (though the chances were a hundred to one against me) to do all that I could, in my painful position, to discover the place of Oscar's retreat. The weary hours of suspense at my father's bedside would be lightened to me, if I could feel that the search for the lost man was being carried on at my instigation, and that from day to day there was a bare possibility of my hearing of him, if there was no more.

The office of the lawyer whom I had consulted during my previous visit to London, lay in my way to the terminus. I drove there next, and was fortunate enough to find him still at business.

No tidings had yet been heard of Oscar. The lawyer, however, proved to be useful by giving me a letter of introduction to a person at Marseilles, accustomed to conduct difficult confidential inquiries, and having agents whom he could employ in all the great cities of Europe. A man of Oscar's startling personal appearance would be surely more or less easy to trace, if the right machinery to do it could only be set at work. My savings would suffice for this purpose to a certain extent--and to that extent I resolved that they should be used when I reached my journey's end.

It was a troubled sea on the channel passage that night. I remained on deck;

accepting any inconvenience rather than descend into the atmosphere of the cabin. As I looked out to sea on one side and on the other, the dark waste of tossing waters seemed to be the fit and dreary type of the dark prospect that was before me. On the trackless path that we were ploughing, a faint misty moonlight shed its doubtful ray. Like the doubtful light of hope, faintly flickering on my mind when I thought of the coming time!