

## CHAPTER THE FORTY-SECOND

The Story of Lucilla: told by Herself

IN my description of what Lucilla said and did, on the occasion when the surgeon was teaching her to use her sight, it will be remembered that she is represented as having been particularly anxious to be allowed to try how she could write.

The motive at the bottom of this was the motive which is always at the bottom of a woman's conduct when she loves. Her one ambition is to present herself to advantage, even in the most trifling matters, before the man on whom her heart is fixed. Lucilla's one ambition with Oscar, was this and no more.

Conscious that her handwriting--thus far, painfully and incompletely guided by her sense of touch--must present itself in sadly unfavorable contrast to the handwriting of other women who could see, she persisted in petitioning Grosse to permit her to learn to "write with her eyes instead of her finger," until she fairly wearied out the worthy German's power of resistance. The rapid improvement in her sight, after her removal to the sea-side, justified him (as I was afterwards informed) in letting her have her way. Little by little, using her eyes for a longer and longer time on each succeeding day, she mastered the serious difficulty of teaching herself to write by sight instead of by touch. Beginning with lines in copybooks, she got on to writing easy words to dictation. From that again, she advanced to writing notes; and from writing notes to keeping a journal--this last, at the suggestion of her aunt, who had lived in the days before penny postage, when people kept journals, and wrote long letters--in short, when people had time to think of themselves, and, more wonderful still, to write about it too.

Lucilla's Journal at Ramsgate lies before me as I trace these lines.

I had planned at first to make use of it, so as to continue the course of my narrative without a check; still writing in my own person--as I have written thus far; and as I propose to write again, at the time when I reappear on the scene.

But on thinking over it once more, and after reading the Journal again, it strikes me as the wiser proceeding to let Lucilla tell the story of her life at Ramsgate, herself: adding notes of my own occasionally, where they appear

to be required. Variety, freshness, and reality--I believe I shall secure them all three by following this plan. Why is History in general (I know there are brilliant exceptions to the rule) such dull reading? Because it is the narrative of events, written at second hand. Now I will be anything else you please, except dull. You may say I have been dull already? As I am an honest woman, I don't agree with you. There are some people who bring dull minds to their reading--and then blame the writer for it. I say no more.

Consider it as arranged, then. During my absence on the Continent, Lucilla shall tell the story of events at Ramsgate. (And I will sprinkle a few notes over it, here and there; signed P.)

### Lucilla's Journal

East Cliff Ramsgate, August 28th.--A fortnight to-day since my aunt and I arrived at this place. I sent Zillah back to the rectory from London. Her rheumatic infirmities trouble her tenfold, poor old soul, in the moist air of the seaside.

How has my writing got on for the last week? I am becoming a little better satisfied with it. I use my pen more easily; my hand is less like the hand of a backward child than it was. I shall be able to write as well as other ladies do when I am Oscar's wife.

[Note.--She is easily satisfied, poor dear. Her improved handwriting is sadly crooked. Some of the letters embrace each other at close quarters like dear friends; and some start asunder like bitter enemies. This is not to reflect on Lucilla--but to excuse myself, if I make any mistakes in transcribing the Journal. Now let her go on.--P.]

Oscar's wife! when shall I be Oscar's wife? I have not so much as seen him yet. Something--I am afraid a difficulty with his brother--still keeps him on the Continent. The tone in which he writes continues to have a certain reserve in it which disquiets and puzzles me. Am I quite as happy as I expected to be when I recovered my sight? Not yet!

It is not Oscar's fault, if I am out of spirits every now and then. It is my own fault. I have offended my father; and I sometimes fear I have not acted justly towards Madame Pratolungo. These things vex me.

It seems to be my fate to be always misunderstood. My sudden flight from the rectory meant no disrespect to my father. I left as I did, because I was quite incapable of facing the woman whom I had once dearly loved--thinking

of her as I think now. It is so unendurable to feel that your confidence is lost in a person whom you once trusted without limit, and to go on meeting that person every hour in the day with a smooth face, as if nothing had happened! The impulse to escape more meetings (when I discovered that she had left the house for a walk) was irresistible. I should do it again, if I was in the same position again. I have hinted at this in writing to my father; telling him that something unpleasant had happened between Madame Pratolungo and me, and that I went away so suddenly, on that account alone. No use! He has not answered my letter. I have written since to my step-mother. Mrs. Finch's reply has informed me of the unjust manner in which he speaks of my aunt. Without the slightest reason for it, he is even more deeply offended with Miss Batchford than he is with me!

Sad as this estrangement is, there is one consolation--so far as I am concerned, it will not last. My father and I are sure, sooner or later, to come to an understanding together. When I return to the rectory, I shall make my peace with him, and we shall get on again as smoothly as ever.

But how will it end between Madame Pratolungo and me?

She has not answered the letter I wrote to her. (I begin to wish I had never written it, or at least some of it--the latter part I mean.) I have heard absolutely nothing of her since she has been abroad. I don't know when she will return--or if she will ever return, to live at Dimchurch again. Oh, what would I not give to have this dreadful mystery cleared up! to know whether I ought to fall down on my knees before her and beg her pardon? or whether I ought to count among the saddest days of my life the day which brought that woman to live with me as companion and friend?

Have I acted rashly? or have I acted wisely?

There is the question which always comes to me and torments me, when I wake in the night. Let me look again (for the fiftieth time at least) at Oscar's letter.

[Note.--I copy the letter. Other eyes than hers ought to see it in this place. It is Nugent, of course, who here writes in Oscar's character and in Oscar's name. You will observe that his good resolutions, when he left me, held out as far as Paris--and then gave way as follows.--P.]

"MY OWN DEAREST,--I have reached Paris, and have found my first opportunity of writing to you since I left Browndown. Madame Pratolungo has no doubt told you that a sudden necessity has called me to my brother.

I have not yet reached the place at which I am to meet him. Before I meet him, let me tell you what the necessity which has parted us really is. Madame Pratolungo no longer possesses my confidence. When you have read on a little farther, she will no longer possess yours.

"Alas, my love, I must amaze you, shock you, grieve you--I who would lay down my life for your happiness! Let me write it in the fewest words. I have made a terrible discovery. Lucilla! you have trusted Madame Pratolungo as your friend. Trust her no longer. She is your enemy, and mine.

"I suspected her some time since. My worst suspicions have been confirmed.

"Long ere this, I ought to have told you, what I tell you now. But I shrink from distressing you. To see a sad look on your dear face breaks my heart. It is only when I am away from you--when I fear the consequences if you are not warned of your danger--that I can summon the courage to tear off the mask from that woman's false face, and show her to you as she really is. It is impossible for me to enter into details in the space of a letter; I reserve all particulars until we meet again, and until I can produce, what you have a right to ask for--proof that I am speaking the truth.

"In the meanwhile, I beg you to look back into your own thoughts, to recall your own words, on the day when Madame Pratolungo offended you in the rectory garden. On that occasion, the truth escaped the Frenchwoman's lips--and she knew it!

"Do you remember what you said, after she had followed you to Browndown? I mean, after she had declared that you would have fallen in love with my brother if you had met him first--and after Nugent (at her instigation no doubt) had taken advantage of your blindness to make you believe that you were speaking to me. When you were smarting under the insult, and when you had found out the trick, what did you say?

"You said these--or nearly these--words:

"She hated you from the first, Oscar--she took up with your brother directly he came here. Don't marry me at Dimchurch! Find out some place that they don't know of! They are both in a conspiracy together against you and against me. Take care of them! take care of them!"

"Lucilla! I echo your own words to you. I return the warning--the prophetic warning--which you unconsciously gave me in that past time. I am afraid my unhappy brother loves you--and I know for certain that Madame

Pratolungo feels the interest in him which she has never felt in me. What you said, I say. They are in a conspiracy together against us. Take care of them! take care of them!

"When we meet again, I shall be prepared to defeat the conspiracy. Till that time comes--as you value your happiness and mine, don't let Madame Pratolungo suspect that you have discovered her. It is she, I firmly believe, who is to blame. I am going to my brother--as you will now understand--with an object far different to the object which I put forward as an excuse to your false friend. Fear no dispute between Nugent and me. I know him. I firmly believe I shall find that he has been tempted and misled. I answer--now that no evil influences are at work on him--for his acting like an honorable man, and deserving your pardon and mine. The excuse I have made to Madame Pratolungo will prevent her from interfering between us. That was my one object in making it.

"Keep me correctly informed of your movements and of hers. I enclose an address to which you can write, with the certainty that your letters will be forwarded.

"On my side, I promise to write constantly. Once more, don't trust a living creature about you with the secret which this letter reveals! Expect me back at the earliest possible moment, to free you--with a husband's authority--from the woman who has so cruelly deceived us.--Yours with the truest affection, the fondest love,

"OSCAR."

[Note.--It is quite needless for me to dwell here on the devilish cunning--I can use no other phrase--which inspired this abominable letter. Look back to the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth chapters, and you will see how skillfully what I said in a moment of foolish irritation, and what Lucilla said when she too had lost her temper, is turned to account to poison her mind against me. We are made innocently to supply our enemy with the foundation on which he builds his plot. For the rest, the letter explains itself. Nugent still persists in personating his brother. He guesses easily at the excuse I should make to Lucilla for his absence; and he gets over the difficulty of appearing to have confided his errand to a woman whom he distrusts, by declaring that he felt it necessary to deceive me as to what the nature of that errand really was. As the Journal proceeds, you will see how dexterously he works the machinery which his letter has set in motion. All I need add here, in the way of explanation, is--that the delay in his arrival at Ramsgate of which Lucilla complains, was caused by nothing but his own

hesitation. His sense of honor--as I knew, from discoveries made at a later time--was not entirely lost yet. The lower he sank, the harder his better nature struggled to raise him. Nothing, positively nothing, but his own remorse need have kept him at Paris (it is needless to say that he never stirred farther, and never discovered the place of his brother's retreat) after Lucilla had informed him by letter, that I had gone abroad, and that she was at Ramsgate with her aunt. I have done: let Lucilla go on again.--P.]

I have read Oscar's letter once more.

He is the soul of honor; he is incapable of deceiving me. I remember saying what he tells me I said, and thinking it too--for the moment only--when I was beside myself with rage. Still--may it not be possible that appearances have misled Oscar? Oh, Madame Pratolungo! I had such a high opinion of you, I loved you so dearly--can you have been unworthy of the admiration and affection that you once inspired in me?

I quite agree with Oscar that his brother is not to blame. It is sad and shocking that Mr. Nugent Dubourg should have allowed himself to fall in love with me. But I cannot help pitying him. Poor disfigured man, I hope he will get a good wife! How he must have suffered!

It is impossible to endure, any longer, my present state of suspense. Oscar must, and shall, satisfy me about Madame Pratolungo--with his own lips. I shall write to him by this post, and insist on his coming to Ramsgate.

August 29th.--I wrote to him yesterday, to the address in Paris. My letter will be delivered to-morrow. Where is he? when will he get it?

[Note.--That innocent letter did its fatal mischief. It ended the struggle against himself which had kept Nugent Dubourg in Paris. On the morning when he received it, he started for England. Here is the entry in Lucilla's journal.--P.]

August 31st.--A telegram for me at breakfast-time. I am too happy to keep my hand steady--I am writing horribly. It doesn't matter: nothing matters but my telegram. (Oh, what a noble creature the man was who invented telegrams!) Oscar is on his way to Ramsgate!