

CHAPTER THE FORTY-FOURTH

Lucilla's Journal, continued

September 4th.

I MARK this day as one of the saddest days of my life. Oscar has shown Madame Pratolungo to me, in her true colors. He has reasoned out this miserable matter with a plainness which it is impossible for me to resist. I have thrown away my love and my confidence on a false woman: there is no sense of honor, no feeling of gratitude or of delicacy in her nature. And I once thought her--it sickens me to recall it! I will see her no more.

[Note.--Did it ever occur to you to be obliged to copy out, with your own hand, this sort of opinion of your own character? I can recommend the sensation produced as something quite new, and the temptation to add a line or two on your own account to be as nearly as possible beyond mortal resistance.--P.]

Oscar and I met at the stairs, at eleven o'clock, as we had arranged.

He took me to the west pier. At that hour of the morning (excepting a few sailors who paid no heed to us) the place was a solitude. It was one of the loveliest days of the season. When we were tired of pacing to and fro, we could sit down under the mellow sunshine, and enjoy the balmy sea air. In that pure light, with all those lovely colors about us, there was something, to my mind, horribly and shamefully out of place in the talk that engrossed us--talk that still turned, hour after hour, on nothing but plots and lies, cruelty, ingratitude, and deceit!

I managed to ask my first question so as to make him enter on the subject at once--without wasting time in phrases to prepare me for what was to come.

"When my aunt mentioned that letter at dinner yesterday," I said, "I fancied that you knew something about it. Was I right?"

"Very nearly right," he answered. "I can't say I knew anything about it. I only suspected that it was the production of an enemy of yours and mine."

"Not Madame Pratolungo?"

"Yes! Madame Pratolungo."

I disagreed with him at the outset. Madame Pratolungo and my aunt had quarreled about politics. Any correspondence between them--a confidential correspondence especially--seemed to be one of the most unlikely things that could take place. I asked Oscar if he could guess what the letter contained, and why it was not to be given to me until Grosse reported that I was quite cured.

"I can't guess at the contents--I can only guess at the object of the letter," he said.

"What is it?"

"The object which she has had in view from the first--to place every possible obstacle in the way of my marrying you."

"What interest can she have in doing that?"

"My brother's interest."

"Forgive me, Oscar. I cannot believe it of her."

We were walking, while these words were passing between us. When I said that, he stopped, and looked at me very earnestly.

"You believed it of her, when you answered my letter," he said.

I admitted that.

"I believed your letter," I replied; "and I shared your opinion of her as long as she was in the same house with me. Her presence fed my anger and my horror of her in some way that I can't account for. Now she has left me--now I have had time to think--there is something in her absence that pleads for her, and tortures me with doubts if I have done right. I can't explain it--I don't understand it. I only know that so it is."

He still looked at me more and more attentively. "Your good opinion of her must have been very firmly rooted to assert itself in this obstinate manner," he said. "What can she have done to deserve it?"

If I had looked back through all my old recollections of her, and had recalled

them one by one, it would only have ended in making me cry. And yet, I felt that I ought to stand up for her as long as I could. I managed to meet the difficulty in this way.

"I will tell you what she did," I said, "after I received your letter. Fortunately for me, she was not very well that morning; and she breakfasted in bed. I had plenty of time to compose myself, and to caution Zillah (who read your letter to me), before we met for the first time that day. On the previous day, I had felt hurt and offended with her for the manner in which she accounted for your absence from Browndown. I thought she was not treating me with the same confidence which I should have placed in her, if our positions had been reversed. When I next saw her, having your warning in my mind, I made my excuses, and said what I thought she would expect me to say, under the circumstances. In my excitement and my wretchedness, I daresay I over-acted my part. At any rate, I roused the suspicion in her that something was wrong. She not only asked me if anything had happened, she went the length of saying, in so many words, that she thought she saw a change in me. I stopped it there, by declaring that I did not understand her. She must have seen that I was not telling the truth: she must have known as well as I knew that I was concealing something from her. For all that, not one word more escaped her lips. A proud delicacy--I saw it as plainly in her face, as I now see you--a proud delicacy silenced her; she looked wounded and hurt. I have been thinking of that look, since I have been here. I have asked myself (what did not occur to me at the time) if a false woman, who knew herself to be guilty, would have behaved in that way? Surely a false woman would have set her wits against mine, and have tried to lead me into betraying to her what discoveries I had really made? Oscar! that delicate silence, that wounded look, will plead for her when I think of her in her absence! I can not feel as satisfied as I once did, that she is the abominable creature you declare her to be. I know you are incapable of deceiving me--I know you believe what you say. But is it not possible that appearances have misled you? Can you really be sure that you have not made some dreadful mistake?"

Without answering me, he suddenly stopped at a seat under the stone parapet of the pier, and signed to me to sit down by him. I obeyed. Instead of looking at me, he kept his head turned away; looking out over the sea. I could not make him out. He perplexed--he almost alarmed me.

"Have I offended you?" I asked.

He turned towards me again, as abruptly as he had turned away. His eyes wandered; his face was pale.

"You are a good generous creature," he said, in a confused hasty way. "Let us talk of something else."

"No!" I answered. "I am too deeply interested in knowing the truth to talk of anything else."

His color changed again at that. His face flushed; he gave a heavy sigh as one does sometimes, when one is making a great effort.

"You will have it?" he said.

"I will have it?"

He rose again. The nearer he was to telling me all that he had kept concealed from me thus far, the harder it seemed to be to him to say the first words.

"Do you mind walking on again?" he asked.

I silently rose on my side, and put my arm in his. We walked on slowly towards the end of the pier. Arrived there, he stood still, and spoke those hard first words--looking out over the broad blue waters: not looking at me.

"I won't ask you to take anything for granted, on my assertion only," he began. "The woman's own words, the woman's own actions, shall prove her guilty."

I interrupted him by a question.

"Tell me one thing," I said. "What first made you suspect her?"

"You first made me suspect her, by what you said of her at Browndown," he answered. "Now carry your memory back to the time I have already mentioned in my letter--when she betrayed herself to you in the rectory garden. Is it true that she said you would have fallen in love with Nugent, if you had met him first instead of me?"

"It is true that she said it," I answered. "At a moment," I added, "when her temper had got the better of her--and when mine had got the better of me."

"Advance the hour a little," he went on, "to the time when she followed you to Browndown. Was she still out of temper, when she made her excuses to

you?"

"No."

"Did she interfere, when Nugent took advantage of your blindness to make you believe you were talking to me?"

"No."

"Was she out of temper then?"

I still defended her. "She might well have been angry," I said. "She had made her excuses to me in the kindest manner; and I had received them with the most unpardonable rudeness."

My defence produced no effect on him. He summed it up coolly so far. "She compared me disadvantageously with Nugent; and she allowed Nugent to personate me in speaking to you, without interfering to stop it. In both these cases, her temper excuses and accounts for her conduct. Very good. We may, or may not, differ so far. Before we go farther, let us--if we can--agree on one unanswerable fact. Which of us two brothers was her favorite, from the first?"

About that, there could be no doubt. I admitted at once that Nugent was her favorite. And more than this, I remembered accusing her myself of never having done justice to Oscar from the first.

[Note.--See the sixteenth chapter, and Madame Pratolungo's remark, warning you that you would hear of this circumstance again.--P.]

Oscar went on.

"Bear that in mind," he said. "And now let us get to the time when we were assembled in your sitting-room, to discuss the subject of the operation on your eyes. The question before us, as I remember it, was this. Were you to marry me, before the operation? Or were you to keep me waiting until the operation had been performed, and the cure was complete? How did Madame Pratolungo decide on that occasion? She decided against my interests; she encouraged you to delay our marriage."

I persisted in defending her. "She did that out of sympathy with me," I said.

He surprised me by again accepting my view of the matter, without

attempting to dispute it.

"We will say she did it out of sympathy with you," he proceeded. "Whatever her motives might be, the result was the same. My marriage to you was indefinitely put off; and Madame Pratolungo voted for that delay."

"And your brother," I added, "took the other side, and tried to persuade me to marry you first. How can you reconcile that with what you have told me---"

He interposed before I could say more. "Don't bring my brother into the inquiry," he said. "My brother, at that time, could still behave like an honorable man, and sacrifice his own feelings to his duty to me. Let us strictly confine ourselves, for the present, to what Madame Pratolungo said and did. And let us advance again to a few minutes later on the same day, when our little domestic debate had ended. My brother was the first to go. Then, you retired, and left Madame Pratolungo and me alone in the room. Do you remember?"

I remembered perfectly.

"You had bitterly disappointed me," I said. "You had shown no sympathy with my eagerness to be restored to the blessing of sight. You made objections and started difficulties. I recollect speaking to you with some of the bitterness that I felt--blaming you for not believing in my future as I believed in it, and hoping as I hoped--and then leaving you, and locking myself up in my own room."

In those terms, I satisfied him that my memory of the events of that day was as clear as his own. He listened without making any remark, and went on when I had done.

"Madame Pratolungo shared your hard opinion of me, on that occasion," he proceeded; "and expressed it in infinitely stronger terms. She betrayed herself to you in the rectory garden. She betrayed herself to me, after you had left us together in the sitting-room. Her hasty temper again, beyond all doubt! I quite agree with you. What she said to me in your absence, she would never have said if she had been mistress of herself."

I began to feel a little startled. "How is it that you now tell me of this for the first time?" I said. "Were you afraid of distressing me?"

"I was afraid of losing you," he answered.

Hitherto, I had kept my arm in his. I drew it out now. If his reply meant anything, it meant that he had once thought me capable of breaking faith with him. He saw that I was hurt.

"Remember," he said, "that I had unhappily offended you that day, and that you have not heard yet what Madame Pratolungo had the audacity to say to me under those circumstances."

"What did she say to you?"

"This:--'It would have been a happier prospect for Lucilla, if she had been going to marry your brother, instead of marrying you.' I repeat literally: those were the words."

I could no more believe it of her than I could have believed it of myself.

"Are you really sure?" I asked him. "Can she have said anything so cruel to you as that?"

Instead of answering me, he took his pocket-book from the breast-pocket of his coat--searched in it--and produced a morsel of folded and crumpled paper. He opened the paper, and showed me some writing inside.

"Is that my writing?" he asked.

It was his writing. I had seen enough of his letters, since the recovery of my sight, to feel sure of that.

"Read it!" he said; "and judge for yourself."

[Note.--You have made your acquaintance with this letter already, in my thirty-second chapter. I had said those foolish words to Oscar (as you will find in my record of the time), under the influence of a natural indignation, which any other woman with a spark of spirit in her would have felt in my place. Instead of personally remonstrating with me, Oscar had (as usual) gone home, and written me a letter of expostulation. Having, on my side, had time to cool--and feeling the absurdity of our exchanging letters when we were within a few minutes' walk of each other--I had gone straight to Browndown, on receiving the letter: first crumpling it up, and (as I supposed) throwing it into the fire. After personally setting myself right with Oscar, I had returned to the rectory; and had there heard that Nugent had been to see me in my absence, had waited a little while alone in the sitting-

room, and had gone away again. When I tell you that the letter which he was now showing to Lucilla, was that same letter of Oscar's, which I had (as I believed) destroyed, you will understand that I had thrown it into the fender instead of into the fire; and that I failed to see it in the fender on my return, simply because Nugent had seen it first, and had taken it away with him. These particulars are described in greater detail in the chapter to which I have referred; the letter itself being there inserted at full length. However, I will save you the trouble of looking back--I know how you hate trouble!--by transcribing literally what I find before me in the Journal. The original letter is pasted on the page: I will copy it from the page for the second time. Am I not good to you? What author by profession would do as much for you as this? I am afraid I am praising myself! Let Lucilla proceed.--P.]

I took the letter from him and read it. At my request, he has permitted me to keep it. The letter is my justification for thinking of Madame Pratolungo as I now think of her. I place it here, before I write another line in my Journal.

"MADAME PRATOLUNGO,--You have distressed and pained me more than I can say. There are faults, and serious ones, on my side, I know. I heartily beg your pardon for anything that I may have said or done to offend you. I cannot submit to your hard verdict on me. If you knew how I adore Lucilla, you would make allowances for me--you would understand me better than you do. I cannot get your last cruel words out of my ears. I cannot meet you again without some explanation of them. You stabbed me to the heart, when you said this evening that it would be a happier prospect for Lucilla if she had been going to marry my brother instead of marrying me. I hope you did not really mean that? Will you please write and tell me whether you did or not?

"OSCAR."

My first proceeding, after reading those lines, was of course to put my arm again in his, and to draw him as close to me as close could be. My second proceeding followed in due time. I asked, naturally, for Madame Pratolungo's answer to that most affectionate and most touching letter.

"I have no answer to show you," he said.

"You have lost it?" I asked.

"I never had it."

"What do you mean?"

"Madame Pratolungo never answered my letter."

I made him repeat that--once, twice. Was it not incredible that such an appeal could be made to any woman not utterly depraved--and be left unnoticed? Twice he reiterated the same answer. Twice he declared on his honor that not a line of reply had been returned to him. She was then utterly depraved? No! there was a last excuse left that justice and friendship might still make for her. I made it.

"There is but one explanation of her conduct," I said. "She never received the letter. Where did you send it to?"

"To the rectory."

"Who took it?"

"My own servant."

"He may have lost it on the way, and have been afraid to tell you. Or the servant at the rectory may have forgotten to deliver it."

Oscar shook his head. "Quite impossible! I know Madame Pratolungo received the letter."

"How?"

"I found it crumpled up in a corner inside the fender, in your sitting-room at the rectory."

"Had it been opened?"

"It had been opened. She had received it; she had read it; and she had not thrown quite far enough to throw it into the fire. Now, Lucilla! Is Madame Pratolungo an injured woman? and am I a man who has slandered her?"

There was another public seat, a few paces distant from us. I could stand no longer. I went away by myself and sat down. A dull sensation possessed me. I could neither speak, nor cry. There I sat in silence; slowly wringing my hands in my lap, and feeling the last ties that still bound me to the once-loved friend of former days, falling away one after the other, and leaving us

parted for life.

He followed me, and stood over me--he summed her up in stern quiet tones, which carried conviction into my mind, and made me feel ashamed of myself for having ever regretted her.

"Look back for the last time, Lucilla, at what this woman has said and done. You will find that the idea of your marrying Nugent is, under one form or another, always present to her mind. Present alike when she forgets herself, and speaks in a rage--or when she reflects, and speaks with a purpose. At one time, she tells you that you would have fallen in love with Nugent, if you had seen him first. At another time, she stands by while Nugent is personating me to you, and never interferes to stop it. On a third occasion, she sees that you are offended with me; and triumphs so cruelly in seeing it, that she tells me to my face, your prospect would have been a much happier one, if you had been engaged to marry my brother instead of me. She is asked in writing, civilly and kindly asked, to explain what she means by those abominable words? She has had time to reflect since she spoke them; and what does she do? Does she answer me? No! She contemptuously tosses my letter into the fire-place. Add to these plain facts what you yourself have observed. Nugent has all her admiration; Nugent is her favorite: from the first, she has always disliked and wronged me. Add to this, again, that Nugent (as I know for certain) privately confessed to her that he was himself in love with you. Look at all these circumstances--and what plain conclusion follows? I ask you once more--Is Madame Pratolungo a slandered woman? or am I right in warning you (as you once warned me) to beware of her?"

What could I do but own that he was right? It was due to him, and due to me, to close my heart to her, from that moment. Oscar sat down by me, and took my hand.

"After my experience of her in the past," he went on softly, "can you wonder that I dread what she may do in the future? Has no such thing ever happened as the parting of true lovers by treachery which has secretly undermined their confidence in each other. Is Madame Pratolungo not clever enough and unscrupulous enough to undermine our confidence, and to turn against us, to the wickedest purpose, the influence which she already possesses at the rectory? How do we know that she is not in communication with Nugent at this moment?"

I stopped him there--I could not endure it. "You have seen your brother," I said. "You have told me that you and he understand each other. What have

you to dread after that?"

"I have to dread Madame Pratolungo's influence, and my brother's infatuation for you," he answered. "The promises which he has honestly made to me, are promises which I cannot depend on when my back is turned, and when Madame Pratolungo may be with him in my absence. Something under the surface is going on already! I don't like that mysterious letter, which is only to be shown to you on certain conditions. I don't like your father's silence. He has had time to answer your letter. Has he done it? He has had time to answer my postscript. Has he done it?"

Those were awkward questions. He had certainly left both our letters unanswered--thus far. Still, the next post might bring his reply. I persisted in taking this view; and I said so to Oscar. He persisted just as obstinately on his side.

"Suppose we go on to the end of the week," he said; "and still no letter from your father comes, for you, or for me? Will you admit, then, that his silence is suspicious?"

"I will admit that his silence shows a sad want of proper consideration for you," I replied.

"And there you will stop? You won't see (what I see) the influence of Madame Pratolungo making itself felt at the rectory, and poisoning your father's mind against our marriage?"

He was pressing me rather hardly. I did my best, however, to tell him honestly what was passing in my mind.

"I can see," I said, "that Madame Pratolungo has behaved most cruelly to you. And I believe, after what you have told me, that she would rejoice if I broke my engagement, and married your brother. But I can not understand that she is mad enough to be actually plotting to make me do it. Nobody knows better than she does how faithfully I love you, and how hopeless it would be to attempt to make me marry another man. Would the stupidest woman living, who looked at you two brothers (knowing what she knows), be stupid enough to do what you suspect Madame Pratolungo of doing?"

I thought this unanswerable. He had his reply to it ready, for all that.

"If you had seen more of the world, Lucilla," he said, "you would know that a true love like yours is a mystery to a woman like Madame Pratolungo. She

doesn't believe in it--she doesn't understand it. She knows herself to be capable of breaking any engagement, if the circumstances encouraged her--and she estimates your fidelity by her knowledge of her own nature. There is nothing in her experience of you, or in her knowledge of my brother's disfigurement, to discourage such a woman from scheming to part us. She has seen for herself--what you have already told me--that you have got over your first aversion to him. She knows that women as charming as you are, have over and over again married men far more personally repulsive than my brother. Lucilla! something which is not to be out-argued, and not to be contradicted, tells me that her return to England will be fatal to my hopes, if that return finds you and me with no closer tie between us than the tie that binds us now. Are these fanciful apprehensions, unworthy of a man? My darling! worthy or not worthy, you ought to make allowances for them. They are apprehensions inspired by my love for You!"

Under those circumstances, I could make every allowance for him--and I said so. He moved nearer to me; and put his arm round me.

"Are we not engaged to each other to be man and wife?" he whispered.

"Yes."

"Are we not both of age, and both free to do as we like?"

"Yes."

"Would you relieve me from the anxieties under which I am suffering, if you could?"

"You know I would!"

"You can relieve me."

"How?"

"By giving me a husband's claim to you, Lucilla--by consenting to marry me in London, in a fortnight's time."

I started back, and looked at him in amazement. For the moment, I was incapable of answering in any other way than that.

"I ask you to do nothing unworthy of you," he said. "I have spoken to a relative of mine living near London--a married lady--whose house is open to

you in the interval before our wedding day. When your visit has been prolonged over a fortnight only, we can be married. Write home by all means to prevent them from feeling anxious about you. Tell them that you are safe and happy, and under responsible and respectable care--but say no more. As long as it is possible for Madame Pratolungo to make mischief between us, conceal the place in which you are living. The instant we are married reveal everything. Let all your friends--let all the world know that we are man and wife!"

His arm trembled round me; his face flushed deep; his eyes devoured me. Some women, in my place, might have been offended; others might have been flattered. As for me--I can trust the secret to these pages--I was frightened.

"Is it an elopement that you are proposing to me?" I asked.

"An elopement!" he repeated. "Between two engaged people who have only themselves to think of."

"I have my father to think of; and my aunt to think of," I said. "You are proposing to me to run away from them, and to keep in hiding from them!"

"I am asking you to pay a fortnight's visit at the house of a married lady--and to keep the knowledge of that visit from the ears of the worst enemy you have, until you have become my wife," he answered. "Is there anything so very terrible in my request that you should turn pale at it, and look at me in that frightened way? Have I not courted you with your father's consent? Am I not your promised husband? Are we not free to decide for ourselves? There is literally no reason--if it could be done--why we should not be married tomorrow. And you still hesitate? Lucilla! Lucilla! you force me to own the doubt that has made me miserable ever since I have been here. Are you indeed as changed towards me as you seem? Do you really no longer love me as you once loved me in the days that are gone?"

He rose, and walked away a few paces, leaning over the parapet with his face in his hands.

I sat alone, not knowing what to say or do. The uneasy sense in me that he had reason to complain of my treating him coldly, was not to be dismissed from my mind by any effort that I could make. He had no right to expect me to take the step which he had proposed--there were objections to it which any woman would have felt in my place. Still, though I was satisfied of this, there was an obstinate something in me which would take his part. It could

not have been my conscience surely which said to me--'There was a time when his entreaties would have prevailed on you; there was a time when you would not have hesitated as you are hesitating now?'

Whatever the influence was, it moved me to rise from my seat, and to join him at the parapet.

"You cannot expect me to decide on such a serious matter as this at once," I said. "Will you give me a little time to think?"

"You are your own mistress," he rejoined bitterly. "Why ask me to give you time? You can take any time you please--you can do as you like."

"Give me till the end of the week," I went on. "Let me be sure that my father persists in not answering either your letter or mine. Though I am my own mistress, nothing but his silence can justify me in going away secretly, and being married to you by a stranger. Don't press me, Oscar! It isn't very long to the end of the week."

Something seemed to startle him--something in my voice perhaps which told him that I was really distressed. He looked round at me quickly, and caught me with the tears in my eyes.

"Don't cry, for God's sake!" he said. "It shall be as you wish. Take your time. We will say no more about it till the end of the week."

He kissed me in a hurried startled way, and gave me his arm to walk back.

"Grosse is coming to-day," he continued. "He mustn't see you looking as you are looking now. You must rest and compose yourself. Come home."

I went back with him, feeling--oh, so sad and sore at heart! My last faint hope of a renewal of my once-pleasant intimacy with Madame Pratolungo was at an end. She stood revealed to me now as a woman whom I ought never to have known--a woman with whom I could never again exchange a friendly word. I had lost the companion with whom I had once been so happy; and I had pained and disappointed Oscar. My life has never looked so wretched and so worthless to me as it looked to-day on the pier at Ramsgate.

He left me at the door, with a gentle encouraging pressure of my hand.

"I will call again later," he said; "and hear what Grosse's report of you is,

before he goes back to London. Rest, Lucilla--rest and compose yourself."

A heavy footstep sounded suddenly behind us as he spoke. We both turned round. Time had slipped by more rapidly than we had thought. There stood Herr Grosse, just arrived on foot from the railway station.

His first look at me seemed to startle and disappoint him. His eyes stared into mine through his spectacles with an expression of surprise and anxiety which I had never seen in them before. Then he turned his head and looked at Oscar with a sudden change--a change, unpleasantly suggestive (to my fancy) of anger or distrust. Not a word fell from his lips. Oscar was left to break the awkward silence. He spoke to Grosse.

"I won't disturb you and your patient now," he said. "I will come back in an hour's time."

"No! you will come in along with me, if you please. I have something, my young gentlemen, that I may want to say to you." He spoke with a frown on his bushy eyebrows, and pointed in a very peremptory manner to the house-door.

Oscar rang the bell. At the same moment my aunt, hearing us outside, appeared on the balcony above the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Grosse," she said. "I hope you find Lucilla looking her best. Only yesterday, I expressed my opinion that she was quite well again."

Grosse took off his hat sulkily to my aunt, and looked back again at me--looked so hard and so long, that he began to confuse me.

"Your aunt's opinions is not my opinions," he growled, close at my ear. "I don't like the looks of you, Miss. Go in!"

The servant was waiting for us at the open door. I went on without making any answer. Grosse waited to see Oscar enter the house before him. Oscar's face darkened as he joined me in the hall. He looked half angry, half confused. Grosse pushed himself roughly between us, and gave me his arm. I went up-stairs with him, wondering what it all meant.