

CHAPTER THE FORTY-SIXTH

The Italian Steamer

LUCILLA'S Journal has told you all that Lucilla can tell. Permit me to reappear in these pages. Shall I say, with your favorite English clown, reappearing every year in your barbarous English pantomime, "Here I am again: how do you do?" No--I had better leave that out. Your clown is one of your national institutions. With this mysterious source of British amusement let no foreign person presume to trifle.

I arrived at Marseilles, as well as I can remember, on the fifteenth of August.

You cannot be expected to feel any interest in good Papa. I will pass over this venerable victim of the amiable delusions of the heart, as rapidly as respect and affection will permit. The duel (I hope you remember the duel?) had been fought with pistols; and the bullet had not been extracted when I joined my sisters at the sufferer's bedside. He was delirious and did not know me. Two days later, the removal of the bullet was accomplished by the surgeon in attendance. For a time, he improved after this. Then there was a relapse. It was only on the first of September that we were permitted to hope he might still be spared to us.

On that date, I was composed enough to think again of Lucilla, and to remember Mrs. Finch's polite request to me that I would write to her from Marseilles.

I wrote briefly, telling the damp lady of the rectory (only at greater length) what I have told here. My main motive in doing this was, I confess, to obtain, through Mrs. Finch, some news of Lucilla. After posting the letter, I attended to another duty which I had neglected while my father was in danger of death. I went to the person to whom my lawyer had recommended me, to institute that search for Oscar which I had determined to set on foot when I left London. The person was connected with the police, in the capacity (as nearly as I can express it in English) of a sort of private superintendent--not officially recognized, but secretly trusted for all that.

When he heard of the time that had elapsed without any discovery of the slightest trace of the fugitive, he looked grave; and declared, honestly enough, that he doubted if he could reward my confidence in him by proving himself to be of the slightest service to me. Seeing, however, that I was

earnestly bent on making some sort of effort, he put a last question to me in these terms:--"You have not described the gentleman yet. Is there, by lucky chance, anything remarkable in his personal appearance?"

"There is something very remarkable, sir," I answered. "Describe it exactly, ma'am, if you please."

I described Oscar's complexion. My excellent superintendent showed encouraging signs of interest as he listened. He was a most elegantly-dressed gentleman, with the gracious manners of a prince. It was quite a privilege to be allowed to talk to him.

"If the missing man has passed through France," he said, "with such a remarkable face as that, there is a fair chance of finding him. I will set preliminary inquiries going at the railway station, at the steam-packet office, and at the port. You shall hear the result to-morrow."

I went back to good Papa's bedside--satisfied, so far.

The next day, my superintendent honored me by a visit.

"Any news, sir?" I asked.

"News already, ma'am. The clerk at the steam-packet office perfectly well remembers selling a ticket to a stranger with a terrible blue face. Unhappily, his memory is not equally good, as to other matters. He cannot accurately call to mind, either the name of the stranger, or the place for which the stranger embarked. We know that he must either have gone to some port in Italy, or to some port in the East. And, thus far, we know no more.

"What are we to do next?" I inquired.

"I propose--with your permission--sending personal descriptions of the gentleman, by telegraph, to the different ports in Italy first. If nothing is heard of him in reply, we will try the ports in the East next. That is the course which I have the honor of submitting to your consideration. Do you approve of it?"

I cordially approved of it; and waited for the results with all the patience that I could command.

The next day passed, and nothing happened. My unhappy father got on very slowly. The vile woman who had caused the disaster (and who had run off

with his antagonist) was perpetually in his mind; disturbing him and keeping him back. Why is a destroying wretch of this sort, a pitiless, treacherous, devouring monster in female form, allowed to be out of prison? You shut up in a cage a poor tigress, who only eats you when she is hungry, and can't provide for her dear little children in any other way--and you let the other and far more dangerous beast of the two range at large under protection of the law! Ah, it is easy to see that the men make the laws. Never mind. The women are coming to the front. Wait a little. The tigresses on two legs will have a bad time of it when we get into Parliament.

On the fourth of the month, the superintendent wrote to me. More news of the lost Oscar already!

The blue man had disembarked at Genoa; and had been traced to the station of the railway running to Turin. More inquiries had been, thereupon, sent by telegraph to Turin. In the meantime, and in the possible event of the missing person returning to England by way of Marseilles, experienced men, provided with a personal description of him, would be posted at various public places, to pass in review all travelers arriving either by land or sea--and to report to me if the right traveler appeared. Once more, my princely superintendent submitted this course to my consideration--and waited for my approval--and got it, with my admiration thrown in as part of the bargain.

The days passed--and good Papa still vacillated between better and worse.

My sisters broke down, poor souls, under their anxieties. It all fell as usual on my shoulders. Day by day, my prospect of returning to England seemed to grow more and more remote. Not a line of reply reached me from Mrs. Finch. This in itself fidgeted and disturbed me. Lucilla was now hardly ever out of my thoughts. Over and over again, my anxiety urged me to run the risk, and write to her. But the same obstacle always raised itself in my way. After what had happened between us, it was impossible for me to write to her directly, without first restoring myself to my former place in her estimation. And I could only do this, by entering into particulars which, for all I knew to the contrary, it might still be cruel and dangerous to reveal.

As for writing to Miss Batchford, I had already tried the old lady's patience in that way, before leaving England. If I tried it again, with no better excuse for a second intrusion than my own anxieties might suggest, the chances were that this uncompromising royalist would throw my letter in the fire, and treat her republican correspondent with contemptuous silence. Grosse was the third, and last, person from whom I might hope to obtain

information. But--shall I confess it?--I did not know what Lucilla might have told him of the estrangement between us, and my pride (remember, if you please, that I am a poverty-stricken foreigner) revolted at the idea of exposing myself to a possible repulse.

However, by the eleventh of the month, I began to feel my suspense so keenly, and to suffer under such painful doubts of what Nugent might be doing in my absence, that I resolved at all hazards on writing to Grosse. It was at least possible, as I calculated--and the Journal will show you I calculated right--that Lucilla had only told him of my melancholy errand at Marseilles, and had mentioned nothing more. I had just opened my desk--when our doctor in attendance entered the room, and announced the joyful intelligence that he could answer at last for the recovery of good Papa.

"Can I go back to England?" I asked eagerly.

"Not immediately. You are his favorite nurse--you must gradually accustom him to the idea of your going away. If you do anything sudden you may cause a relapse."

"I will do nothing sudden. Only tell me, when it will be safe--absolutely safe--for me to go?"

"Say, in a week."

"On the eighteenth?"

"On the eighteenth."

I shut up my writing-desk. Within a few days, I might now hope to be in England as soon as I could receive Grosse's answer at Marseilles. Under these circumstances, it would be better to wait until I could make my inquiries, safely and independently, in my own proper person. Comparison of dates will show that if I had written to the German oculist, it would have been too late. It was now the eleventh; and Lucilla had left Ramsgate with Nugent on the fifth.

All this time but one small morsel of news rewarded our inquiries after Oscar--and even that small morsel seemed to me to be unworthy of belief.

It was said that he had been seen at a military hospital--the hospital of Alessandria, in Piedmont, I think--acting, under the surgeons, as attendant on the badly-wounded men who had survived the famous campaign of

France and Italy against Austria. (Bear in mind, if you please, that I am writing of the year eighteen hundred and fifty-nine, and that the peace of Villafranca was only signed in the July of that year.) Occupation as hospital-man-nurse was, to my mind, occupation so utterly at variance with Oscar's temperament and character, that I persisted in considering the intelligence thus received of him to be on the face of it false.

On the seventeenth of the month, I had got my passport regulated, and had packed up the greater part of my baggage in anticipation of my journey back to England on the next day.

Carefully as I had tried to accustom his mind to the idea, my poor father remained so immovably reluctant to let me leave him, that I was obliged to consent to a sort of compromise. I promised, when the business which took me to England was settled, to return again to Marseilles, and to travel back with him to his home in Paris, as soon as he was fit to be moved. On this condition, I gained permission to go. Poor as I was, I infinitely preferred charging my slender purse with the expense of the double journey, to remaining any longer in ignorance of what was going on at Ramsgate--or at Dimchurch, as the case might be. Now that my mind was free from anxiety about my father, I don't know which tormented me most--my eagerness to set myself right with my sister-friend, or my vague dread of the mischief which Nugent might have done while my back was turned. Over, and over again I asked myself, whether Miss Batchford had, or had not, shown my letter to Lucilla. Over and over again, I wondered whether it had been my happy privilege to reveal Nugent under his true aspect, and to preserve Lucilla for Oscar after all.

Towards the afternoon, on the seventeenth, I went out alone to get a breath of fresh air, and a look at the shop-windows. I don't care who or what she may be--high or low; handsome or ugly; young or old--it always relieves a woman's mind to look at the shop-windows.

I had not been five minutes out, before I met my princely superintendent.

"Any news for me to-day?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Not yet?" I repeated. "You expect news then?"

"We expect an Italian steam-ship to arrive in port before the evening," said the superintendent. "Who knows what may happen?"

He bowed and left me. I felt no great elation on contemplating the barren prospect which his last words had placed before me. So many steamers had arrived at Marseilles, without bringing any news of the missing man, that I attached very little importance to the arrival of the Italian ship. However, I had nothing to do--I wanted a walk--and I thought I might as well stroll down to the port, and see the vessel come in.

The vessel was just entering the harbor by the time I got to the landing-stage.

I found our man employed to investigate travelers arriving by sea, punctually at his post. His influence broke through the vexatious French rules and regulations which forbid all freedom of public movement within official limits, and procured me a place in the room at the custom-house through which the passengers by the steamer would be obliged to pass. I accepted his polite attention, simply because I was glad to sit down and rest in a quiet place after my walk--not even the shadow of an idea that anything would come of my visit to the harbor being in my mind at the time.

After a long interval the passengers began to stream into the room. Looking languidly enough at the first half-dozen strangers who came in, I felt myself touched on the shoulder from behind. There was our man, in a state of indescribable excitement, entreating me to compose myself!

Being perfectly composed already, I stared at him, and asked, "Why?"

"He is here!" cried the man. "Look!"

He pointed to the passengers still crowding into the room. I looked; and, instantly losing my head, started up with a cry that turned everybody's eyes on me. Yes! there was the poor dear discolored face--there was Oscar himself, thunderstruck on his side at the sight of Me!

I snatched the key of his portmanteau out of his hand, and gave it to our man--who undertook to submit it to the customhouse examination, and to bring it to my lodging afterwards. Holding Oscar fast by the arm, I pushed my way through the crowd in the room, got outside, and hailed a cab at the dock gates. The people about, noticing my agitation, said to each other compassionately, "It's the blue man's mother!" Idiots! They might have seen, I think, that I was only old enough to be his elder sister.

Once sheltered in the vehicle, I could draw my breath again, and reward him

for all the anxiety he had caused me by giving him a kiss. I might have given him a thousand kisses. Amazement made him a perfectly passive creature in my hands. He only repeated faintly, over and over again, "What does it mean? what does it mean?"

"It means that you have friends, you wretch, who are fools enough to be too fond of you to give you up!" I said. "I am one of the fools. You will come to England with me to-morrow--and see for yourself if Lucilla is not another."

That reference to Lucilla restored him to the possession of his senses. He began to ask the questions that naturally occurred to him under the circumstances. Having plenty of questions in reserve, on my side, I told him briefly enough what had brought me to Marseilles, and what I had done, during my residence in that city, towards discovering the place of his retreat.

When he asked me next--after a momentary struggle with himself--what I could tell him of Nugent and Lucilla, it is not to be denied that I hesitated before I answered him. A moment's consideration, however, was enough to decide me on speaking out--for this plain reason, that a moment's consideration reminded me of the troubles and annoyances which had already befallen us as the result of concealing the truth. I told Oscar honestly all that I have related here--starting from my night interview with Nugent at Browndown, and ending with my precautionary measures for the protection of Lucilla while she was living under the care of her aunt.

I was greatly interested in watching the effect which these disclosures produced on Oscar.

My observation led me to form two conclusions. First conclusion, that time and absence had not produced the slightest change in the love which the poor fellow bore to Lucilla. Second conclusion, that nothing but absolute proof would induce him to agree in my unfavorable opinion of his brother's character. It was in vain I declared that Nugent had quitted England pledged to find him, and had left it to me (as the event now proved) to make the discovery. He owned readily that he had seen nothing, and heard nothing, of Nugent. Nevertheless his confidence in his brother remained unshaken. "Nugent is the soul of honor," he repeated again and again--with a side-look at me which suggested that my frankly-avowed opinion of his brother had hurt and offended him.

I had barely time to notice this, before we reached my lodgings. He appeared to be unwilling to follow me into the house.

"I suppose you have some proof to support what you have said of Nugent," he resumed, stopping in the courtyard. "Have you written to England since you have been here? and have you had a reply?"

"I have written to Mrs. Finch," I answered; "and I have not had a word in reply."

"Have you written to no one else?"

I explained to him the position in which I stood towards Miss Batchford, and the hesitation which I had felt about writing to Grosse. The smoldering resentment against me that had been in him ever since I had spoken of his brother and of Lucilla, flamed up at last.

"I entirely disagree with you," he broke out angrily. "You are wronging Lucilla and wronging Nugent. Lucilla is incapable of saying anything against you to Grosse; and Nugent is equally incapable of misleading her as you suppose. What horrible ingratitude you attribute to one of them--and what horrible baseness to the other! I have listened to you as patiently as I can; and I feel sincerely obliged by the interest which you have shown in me--but I cannot remain in your company any longer. Madame Pratolungo, your suspicions are inhuman! You have not brought forward a shadow of proof in support of them. I will send here for my luggage, if you will allow me--and I will start for England by the next train. After what you have said, I can't rest till I have found out the truth for myself."

This was my reward for all the trouble that I had taken to discover Oscar Dubourg! Never mind the money I had spent--I am not rich enough to care about money--only consider the trouble. If I had been a man, I do really think I should have knocked him down. Being only a woman, I dropped him a low curtsy, and stung him with my tongue.

"As you please, sir," I said. "I have done my best to serve you--and you quarrel with me and leave me, in return. Go! You are not the first fool who has quarreled with his best friend."

Either the words or the curtsy--or both together--brought him to his senses. He made me an apology--which I received. And he looked excessively foolish--which put me in an excellent humour again. "You stupid boy," I said, taking his arm, and leading him to the stairs. "When we first met at Dimchurch did you find me a suspicious woman or an inhuman woman? Answer me that!"

He answered frankly enough.

"I found you all that was kind and good. Still, it is surely only natural to want some confirmation----" He checked himself there, and reverted abruptly to my letter to Mrs. Finch. The silence of the rector's wife evidently alarmed him. "How long is it since you wrote?" he inquired.

"As long ago as the first of this month," I replied.

He fell into thought. We ascended the next flight of stairs in silence. At the landing, he stopped me, and spoke again. My unanswered letter was still uppermost in his mind.

"Mrs. Finch loses everything that can be lost," he said. "Is it not likely--with her habits--that when she had written her answer, and wanted your letter to look at to put the address on it, your letter was like her handkerchief or her novel, or anything else--not to be found?"

So far, no doubt, this was quite in Mrs. Finch's character. I could see that--but my mind was too much pre-occupied to draw the inference that followed. Oscar's next words enlightened me.

"Have you tried the Poste-Restante?" he asked.

What could I possibly have been thinking of! Of course, she had lost my letter. Of course, the whole house would be upset in looking for it, and the rector would silence the uproar by ordering his wife to try the Poste-Restante. How strangely we had changed places! Instead of my clear head thinking for Oscar, here was Oscar's clear head thinking for Me. Is my stupidity quite incredible? Remember, if you please, what a weight of trouble and anxiety had lain on my mind while I was at Marseilles. Can one think of everything while one is afflicted, as I was? Not even such a clever person as You can do that. If, as the saying is, "Homer sometimes nods"--why not Madame Pratulungo?

"I never thought of the Poste-Restante," I said to Oscar. "If you don't mind going back a little way, shall we inquire at once?"

He was perfectly willing. We went downstairs again, and out into the street. On our way to the post-office, I seized my first opportunity of making Oscar give me some account of himself.

"I have satisfied your curiosity, to the best of my ability," I said, as we walked arm-in-arm through the streets. "Now suppose you satisfy mine. A report of your having been seen in a military hospital in Italy, is the only report of you which has reached me here. Of course, it is not true?"

"It is perfectly true."

"You, in a hospital, nursing wounded soldiers?"

"That is exactly what I have been doing."

No words could express my astonishment. I could only stop, and look at him.

"Was that the occupation which you had in view when you left England?" I asked.

"I had no object in leaving England," he answered, "but the object which I avowed to you. After what had happened, I owed it to Lucilla and I owed it to Nugent to go. I left England without caring where I went. The train to Lyons happened to be the first train that started on my arrival at Paris. I took the first train. At Lyons, I saw by chance an account in a French newspaper of the sufferings of some of the badly-wounded men, left still uncured after the battle of Solferino. I felt an impulse, in my own wretchedness, to help these other sufferers in their misery. On every other side of it, my life was wasted. The one worthy use to which I could put it was to employ myself in doing good; and here was good to be done, I managed to get the necessary letters of introduction at Turin. With the help of these, I made myself of some use (under the regular surgeons and dressers) in nursing the poor mutilated, crippled men; and I have helped a little afterwards, from my own resources, in starting them comfortably in new ways of life."

In those manly and simple words, he told me his story.

Once more I felt, what I had felt already, that there were hidden reserves of strength in the character of this innocent young fellow, which had utterly escaped my superficial observation of him. In choosing his vocation, he was, no doubt, only following the conventional modern course in such cases. Despair has its fashions, as well as dress. Ancient despair (especially of Oscar's sort) used to turn soldier, or go into a monastery. Modern despair turns nurse; binds up wounds, gives physic, and gets cured or not in that useful but nasty way. Oscar had certainly struck out nothing new for himself: he had only followed the fashion. Still, it implied, as I thought, both

courage and resolution to have conquered the obstacles which he must have overcome, and to have held steadily on his course after he had once entered it. Having begun by quarreling with him, I was in a fair way to end by respecting him. Surely this man was worth preserving for Lucilla, after all!

"May I ask where you were going, when we met at the port?" I continued. "Have you left Italy because there were no more wounded soldiers to be cured?"

"There was no more work for me at the hospital to which I was attached," he said. "And there were certain obstacles in my way, as a stranger and a Protestant, among the poor and afflicted population outside the hospital. I might have overcome those obstacles, with little trouble, among a people so essentially good-tempered and courteous as the Italians, if I had tried. But it occurred to me that my first duty was to my own countrymen. The misery crying for relief in London, is misery not paralleled in any city of Italy. When you met me, I was on my way to London, to place my services at the disposal of any clergyman, in a poor neighborhood, who would accept such help as I can offer him." He paused a little--hesitated--and added in lower tones:--"That was one of my objects in returning to England. It is only honest to own to you that I had another motive besides."

"A motive connected with your brother and with Lucilla?" I suggested.

"Yes. Don't misinterpret me! I am not returning to England to retract what I said to Nugent. I still leave him free to plead his own cause with Lucilla in his own person. I am still resolved not to distress myself and distress them, by returning to Dimchurch. But I have a longing that nothing can subdue, to know how it has ended between them. Don't ask me to say more than that! In spite of the time that has passed, it breaks my heart to talk of Lucilla. I had looked forward to a meeting with you in London, and to hearing what I longed to hear, from your lips. Judge for yourself what my hopes were when I first saw your face; and forgive me if I felt my disappointment bitterly, when I found that you had really no news to tell, and when you spoke of Nugent as you did." He stopped, and pressed my arm earnestly. "Suppose I am right about Miss Finch's letter?" he added. "Suppose it should really be waiting for you at the post?"

"Well?"

"The letter may contain the news which I most want to hear."

I checked him there. "I am not sure of that," I answered. "I don't know what

it is that you most want to hear."

I said those words with a purpose. What was the news he was longing for? In spite of all that he had told me, my instincts answered: News that Lucilla is still a single woman. My object in speaking as I had just spoken, was to tempt him into a reply which might confirm me in this opinion. He evaded the reply. Was that confirmation in itself? Yes--as I think!

"Will you tell me what there is in the letter?" he asked--passing, as you see, entirely over what I had just said to him.

"Yes--if you wish it," I answered: not over well pleased with his want of confidence in me.

"No matter what the letter contains?" he went on, evidently doubting me.

I said Yes, again--that one word, and no more.

"I suppose it would be asking too much," he persisted, "to ask you to let me read the letter myself?"

My temper, as you are well aware by this time, is not the temper of a saint. I drew my arm smartly out of his arm; and I surveyed him with, what poor Pratulungo used to call, "my Roman look."

"Mr. Oscar Dubourg! say, in plain words, that you distrust me."

He protested of course that he did nothing of the kind--without producing the slightest effect on me. Just run over in your mind the insults, worries, and anxieties which had assailed me, as the reward for my friendly interest in this man's welfare. Or, if that is too great an effort, be so good as to remember that Lucilla's farewell letter to me at Dimchurch, was now followed by the equally ungracious expression of Oscar's distrust--and this at a time when I had had serious trials of my own to sustain at my father's bedside. I think you will admit that a sweeter temper than mine might have not unnaturally turned a little sour under present circumstances.

I answered not a word to Oscar's protestations--I only searched vehemently in the pocket of my dress.

"Here," I said, opening my card-case, "is my address in this place; and here," I went on, producing the document, "is my passport, if they want it."

I forced the card and the passport into his hands. He took them in helpless astonishment.

"What am I to do with these?" he asked.

"Take them to the Poste-Restante. If there is a letter for me with the Dimchurch post-mark, I authorize you to open it. Read it before it comes into my hands--and then perhaps you will be satisfied?"

He declared that he would do nothing of the sort--and tried to force my documents back into my own possession.

"Please yourself," I said. "I have done with you and your affairs. Mrs. Finch's letter is of no earthly consequence to me. If it is at the Poste-Restante, I shall not trouble myself to ask for it. What concern have I with news about Lucilla? What does it matter to me whether she is married or not? I am going back to my father and my sisters. Decide for yourself whether you want Mrs. Finch's letter or not."

That settled it. He went his way with my documents to the post-office; and I went mine back to the lodging.

Arrived in my room, I still held to the resolution which I had expressed to Oscar in the street. Why should I leave my poor old father to go back to England, and mix myself up in Lucilla's affairs? After the manner in which she had taken her leave of me, had I any reasonable prospect of being civilly received? Oscar was on his way to England--let Oscar manage his own affairs; let them all three (Oscar, Nugent, Lucilla) fight it out together among themselves. What had I, Pratolungo's widow, to do with this trumpety family entanglement? Nothing! It was a warm day for the time of year--Pratolungo's widow, like a wise woman, determined to make herself comfortable. She unlocked her packed box; she removed her traveling costume, and put on her dressing-gown; she took a turn in the room--and, if you had come across her at that moment, I wouldn't have stood in your shoes for something, I can tell you!

(What do you think of my consistency by this time? How often have I changed my mind about Lucilla and Oscar? Reckon it up, from the time when I left Dimchurch. What a picture of perpetual self-contradiction I present--and how improbable it is that I should act in this illogical way! You never alter your mind under the influence of your temper or your circumstances. No: you are, what they call, a consistent character. And I? Oh, I am only a human being--and I feel painfully conscious that I have no

business to be in a book.)

In about half an hour's time, the servant appeared with a little paper parcel for me. It had been left by a stranger with an English accent and a terrible face. He had announced his intention of calling a little later. The servant, a bouncing fat wench, trembled as she repeated the message, and asked if there was anything amiss between me and the man with the terrible face.

I opened the parcel. It contained my passport, and, sure enough, the letter from Mrs. Finch. Had he opened it? Yes! He had not been able to resist the temptation to read it. And more, he had written a line or two on it in pencil, thus:--"As soon as I am fit to see you, I will implore your pardon. I dare not trust myself in your presence yet. Read the letter, and you will understand why."

I opened the letter.

It was dated the fifth of September. I ran over the first few sentences carelessly enough. Thanks for my letter--congratulations on my father's prospect of recovery--information about baby's gums and the rector's last sermon--more information about somebody else, which Mrs. Finch felt quite sure would interest and delight me. What!!! "Mr. Oscar Dubourg has come back, and is now with Lucilla at Ramsgate."

I crumpled the letter up in my hand. Nugent had justified my worst anticipations of what he would do in my absence. What did the true Mr. Oscar Dubourg, reading that sentence at Marseilles, think of his brother now? We are all mortal--we are all wicked. It is monstrous, but it is true. I had a moment's triumph.

The wicked moment gone, I was good again--that is to say, I was ashamed of myself.

I smoothed out the letter, and looked eagerly for news of Lucilla's health. If the news was favorable, my letter committed to Miss Batchford's care must have been shown to Lucilla by this time; must have exposed Nugent's abominable personation of his brother; and must have thus preserved her for Oscar. In that case, all would be well again (and my darling herself would own it)--thanks to Me!

After telling me the news from Ramsgate, Mrs. Finch began to drift into, what you call, Twaddle. She had just discovered (exactly as Oscar had supposed) that she had lost my letter. She would keep her own letter back

until the next day, on the chance of finding it. If she failed she must try Poste-Restante, at the suggestion (not of Mr. Finch--there I was wrong)--at the suggestion of Zillah, who had relatives in foreign parts, and had tried Poste-Restante in her case too. So Mrs. Finch drove mildly on, in her large loose untidy handwriting, to the bottom of the third page.

I turned over. The handwriting suddenly grew untidier than ever; two great blots defaced the paper; the style became feebly hysterical. Good Heavens! what did I read when I made it out at last! See for yourselves; here are the words: "Some hours have passed--it is just tea-time---oh, my dear friend, I can hardly hold the pen, I tremble so--would you believe it, Miss Batchford has arrived at the rectory--she brings the dreadful news that Lucilla has eloped with Oscar--we don't know why--we don't know where, except that they have gone away together privately--a letter from Oscar tells Miss Batchford as much as that, and no more--oh, pray come back as soon as you can--Mr. Finch washes his hands of it--and Miss Batchford has left the house again in a fury with him--I am in dreadful agitation, and I have given it Mr. Finch says to baby, who is screaming black in the face. Yours affectionately,

"AMELIA FINCH."

All the rages I had ever been in before in my life were as nothing compared with the rage that devoured me when I had read that fourth page of Mrs. Finch's letter. Nugent had got the better of me and my precautions! Nugent had robbed his brother of Lucilla, in the vilest manner, with perfect impunity! I cast all feminine restraints to the winds. I sat down with my legs anyhow, like a man. I rammed my hands into the pockets of my dressing-gown. Did I cry? A word in your ear--and let it go no farther. I swore.

How long the fit lasted, I don't know. I only remember that I was disturbed by a knock at my door.

I flung open the door in a fury--and confronted Oscar on the threshold.

There was a look in his face that instantly quieted me. There was a tone in his voice that brought the tears suddenly into my eyes.

"I must leave for England in two hours," he said. "Will you forgive me, Madame Pratolungo, before I go?"

Only those words! And yet--if you had seen him, if you had heard him, as he spoke them--you would have been ready as I was--not only to forgive him--but to go to the ends of the earth with him; and you would have told him so, as I did.

In two hours more, we were in the train, on our way to England.