

## **CHAPTER THE FORTY-SEVENTH**

On the Way to the End. First Stage

You will perhaps expect me to give some account of how Oscar bore the discovery of his brother's conduct.

I find it by no means easy to do this. Oscar baffled me.

The first words of any importance which he addressed to me were spoken on our way to the station. Rousing himself from his own thoughts, he said very earnestly----

"I want to know what conclusion you have drawn from Mrs. Finch's letter."

Naturally enough, under the circumstances, I tried to avoid answering him. He was not to be put off in that way.

"You will do me a favor," he went on, "if you will reply to my question. The letter has bred in me such a vile suspicion of my dear good brother, who never deceived me in his life, that I would rather believe I am out of my mind than believe in my own interpretation of it. Do you infer from what Mrs. Finch writes, that Nugent has presented himself to Lucilla under my name? Do you believe that he has persuaded her to leave her friends, under the impression that she has yielded to My entreaties, and trusted herself to My care?"

I answered in the fewest and plainest words, "That is what your brother has done."

A sudden change passed over him. My reply seemed to have set his last doubts at rest in an instant.

"That is what my brother has done," he repeated. "After all that I sacrificed to him--after all that I trusted to his honor--when I left England." He paused, and considered a little. "What does such a man deserve?" he went on; speaking to himself, in a low threatening tone that startled me.

"He deserves," I said, "what he will get when we reach England. You have only to show yourself to make him repent his wickedness to the last day of his life. Are exposure and defeat not punishment enough for such a man as

Nugent?" I stopped, and waited for his answer.

He turned his face away from me, and said no more until we arrived at the station. There, he drew me aside for a moment out of hearing of the strangers about us.

"Why should I take you away from your father?" he asked abruptly. "I am behaving very selfishly--and I only see it now."

"Make your mind easy," I said. "If I had not met you to-day, I should have gone to England to-morrow for Lucilla's sake."

"But now you have met me," he persisted, "why shouldn't I spare you the journey? I could write and tell you every thing--without putting you to this fatigue and expense."

"If you say a word more," I answered, "I shall think you have some reason of your own for wishing to go to England by yourself."

He cast one quick suspicious look at me--and led the way back to the booking-office without uttering another word. I was not at all satisfied with him. I thought his conduct very strange.

In silence we took our tickets; in silence, we got into the railway-carriage. I attempted to say something encouraging, when we started. "Don't notice me," was all he replied. "You will be doing me a kindness, if you will let me bear it by myself." In my former experience of him, he had talked his way out of all his other troubles--he had clamorously demanded the expression of my sympathy with him. In this greatest trouble, he was like another being; I hardly knew him again! Were the hidden reserves in his nature (stirred up by another serious call on them) showing themselves once more on the surface as they had shown themselves already, on the fatal first day when Lucilla tried her sight? In that way I accounted for the mere superficial change in him, at the time. What was actually going on below the surface it defied my ingenuity even to guess. Perhaps I shall best describe the sort of vague apprehension which he aroused in me--after what had passed between us at the station--by saying that I would not for worlds have allowed him to go to England by himself.

Left as I now was to my own resources, I occupied the first hours of the journey, in considering what course it would be safest and best for us to take, on reaching England.

I decided, in the first place, that we ought to go straight to Dimchurch. If any tidings had been obtained of Lucilla, they would be sure to have received them at the rectory. Our route, after reaching Paris, must be therefore by way of Dieppe; thence across the Channel to Newhaven, near Brighton--and so to Dimchurch.

In the second place--assuming it to be always possible that we might see Lucilla at the rectory--the risk of abruptly presenting Oscar to her in his own proper person might, for all I knew to the contrary, be a very serious one. It would relieve us, as I thought, of a grave responsibility, if we warned Grosse of our arrival, and so enabled him to be present, if he thought it necessary, in the interests of Lucilla's health. I put this view (as also my plan for returning by way of Dieppe) to Oscar. He briefly consented to everything--he ungraciously left it all to me.

Accordingly, on our arrival at Lyons, having some time for refreshment at our disposal before we went on, I telegraphed to Mr. Finch at the rectory, and to Grosse in London; informing them (as well as I could calculate it) that, if we were lucky in catching trains and steamboats, Oscar and I might be in Dimchurch in good time, on the next night--that is to say, on the night of the eighteenth. In any case, they were to expect us at the earliest possible moment.

These difficulties disposed of, and a little store of refreshment for the night packed in my basket, we re-entered the train, for our long journey to Paris.

Among the new passengers who joined us at Lyons was a gentleman whose face was English, and whose dress was the dress of a clergyman. For the first time in my life, I hailed the appearance of a priest with a feeling of relief. The reason was this. From the moment when I had read Mrs. Finch's letter until now, a horrid doubt, which a priest was just the man to solve, had laid its leaden weight on my mind--and, I firmly believe, on Oscar's mind as well. Had time enough passed, since Lucilla had left Ramsgate, to allow of Nugent's marrying her, under his brother's name?

As the train rolled out of the station, I, the enemy of priests, began to make myself agreeable to this priest. He was young and shy--but I conquered him. Just as the other travelers were beginning (with the exception of Oscar) to compose themselves to sleep, I put my case to the clergyman. "A and B, sir, lady and gentleman, both of age, leave one place in England, and go to live in another place, on the fifth of this month--how soon, if you please, can they be lawfully married after that?"

"I presume you mean in church?" said the young clergyman.

"In church, of course." (To that extent I believed I might answer for Lucilla, without any fear of making a mistake.)

"They may be married by License," said the clergyman--"provided one of them continues to reside in that other place to which they traveled on the fifth--on the twenty-first, or (possibly) even the twentieth of this month."

"Not before?"

"Certainly not before."

It was then the night of the seventeenth. I gave my companion's hand a little squeeze in the dark. Here was a glimpse of encouragement to cheer us on the journey. Before the marriage could take place, we should be in England. "We have time before us," I whispered to Oscar. "We will save Lucilla yet."

"Shall we find Lucilla?" was all he whispered back.

I had forgotten that serious difficulty. No answer to Oscar's question could possibly present itself until we reached the rectory. Between this and then, there was nothing for it but to keep patience and to keep hope.

I refrain from encumbering this part of my narrative with any detailed account of the little accidents, lucky and unlucky, which alternately hastened or retarded our journey home. Let me only say that, before midnight on the eighteenth, Oscar and I drove up to the rectory gate.

Mr. Finch himself came out to receive us, with a lamp in his hand. He lifted his eyes (and his lamp) devotionally to the sky when he saw Oscar. The two first words he said, were:--

"Inscrutable Providence!"

"Have you found Lucilla?" I asked.

Mr. Finch--with his whole attention fixed on Oscar--wrung my hand mechanically, and said I was a "good creature;" much as he might have patted, and spoken to, Oscar's companion, if the companion had been a dog. I almost wished myself that animal for the moment--I should have had the privilege of biting Mr. Finch. Oscar impatiently repeated my question; the rector, at the time, officiously assisting him to descend from the carriage,

and leaving me to get out as I could.

"Did you hear Madame Pratolungo?" Oscar asked. "Is Lucilla found?"

"Dear Oscar, we hope to find her, now you have come."

That answer revealed to me the secret of Mr. Finch's extraordinary politeness to his young friend. The last chance, as things were, of preventing Lucilla's marriage to a man who had squandered away every farthing of his money, was the chance of Oscar's arrival in England before the ceremony could take place. The measure of Oscar's importance to Mr. Finch was now, more literally than ever, the measure of Oscar's fortune.

I asked for news of Grosse as we went in. The rector actually found some comparatively high notes in his prodigious voice, to express his amazement at my audacity in speaking to him of anybody but Oscar.

"Oh, dear, dear me!" cried Mr. Finch, impatiently conceding to me one precious moment of his attention. "Don't bother about Grosse! Grosse is ill in London. There is a note for you from Grosse.--Take care of the door-step, dear Oscar," he went on, in his deepest and gravest bass notes. "Mrs. Finch is so anxious to see you. We have both looked forward to your arrival with such eager hope--such impatient affection, so to speak. Let me put down your hat. Ah! how you must have suffered! Share my trust in an all-wise Providence, and meet this trial with cheerful submission as I do. All is not lost yet. Bear up! bear up!" He threw open the parlor door. "Mrs. Finch! compose yourself. Our dear adopted son. Our afflicted Oscar!"

Is it necessary to say what Mrs. Finch was about, and how Mrs. Finch looked?

There were the three unchangeable institutions--the novel, the baby, and the missing pocket-handkerchief There was the gaudy jacket over the long trailing dressing-gown--and the damp lady inside them, damp as ever! Receiving Oscar with a mouth drawn down at the corners, and a head that shook sadly in sympathy with him, Mrs. Finch's face underwent a most extraordinary transformation when she turned my way next. To my astonishment, her dim eyes actually sparkled; a broad smile of irrepressible contentment showed itself cunningly to me, in place of the dismal expression which had welcomed Oscar. Holding up the baby in triumph, the lady of the rectory whispered these words in my ear:--"What do you think he has done since you have been away?"

"I really don't know," I answered.

"He has cut two teeth! Put your finger in and feel."

Others might bewail the family misfortune. The family triumph filled the secret mind of Mrs. Finch, to the exclusion of every other earthly consideration. I put my finger in as instructed, and got instantly bitten by the ferocious baby. But for a new outburst of the rector's voice at the moment, Mrs. Finch (if I am any judge of physiognomy) must have certainly relieved herself by a scream of delight. As it was, she opened her mouth; and (having lost her handkerchief as already stated) retired into a corner, and gagged herself with the baby.

In the meantime, Mr. Finch had produced from a cupboard near the fireplace, two letters. The first he threw down impatiently on the table. "Oh, dear, dear! what a nuisance other people's letters are!" The second he handled with extraordinary care; offering it to Oscar with a heavy sigh, and with eyes that turned up martyr-like to the ceiling. "Rouse yourself, and read it," said Mr. Finch in his most pathetic pulpit tones. "I would have spared you, Oscar, if I could. All our hopes depend, dear boy, on what you can say to guide us when you have read those lines."

Oscar took the enclosure out of the envelope--ran over the first words--glanced at the signature--and, with a look of mingled rage and horror, threw the letter on the floor.

"Don't ask me to read it!" he cried, in the first burst of passion which had escaped him yet. "If I read it, I shall kill him when we meet." He dropped into a chair, and hid his face in his hands. "Oh, Nugent! Nugent! Nugent!" he moaned to himself, with a cry that was dreadful to hear.

It was no time for standing on ceremony. I picked up the letter, and looked at it without asking leave. It proved to be the letter from Nugent (already inserted at the close of Lucilla's Journal), informing Miss Batchford of her niece's flight from Ramsgate, and signed in Oscar's name. The only words which it is necessary to repeat here, are these:--"She accompanies me, at my express request, to the house of a married lady who is a relative of mine, and under whose care she will remain, until the time arrives for our marriage."

Those lines instantly lightened my heart of the burden that had oppressed it on the journey. Nugent's married relative was Oscar's married relative too. Oscar had only to tell us where the lady lived--and Lucilla would be found!

I stopped Mr. Finch, in the act of maddening Oscar by administering pastoral consolation to him.

"Leave it to me," I said, showing him the letter. "I know what you want."

The rector stared at me indignantly. I turned to Mrs. Finch.

"We have had a weary journey," I went on. "Oscar is not so well used to traveling as I am. Where is his room?"

Mrs. Finch rose to show the way. Her husband opened his lips to interfere.

"Leave it to me," I repeated. "I understand him; and you don't."

For once in his life, the Pope of Dimchurch was reduced to silence. His amazement at my audacity defied even his powers of expression. I took Oscar's arm, and said, "You are worn out. Go to your room. I will make you something warm and bring it up to you myself in a few minutes." He neither looked at me nor answered me--he yielded silently and followed Mrs. Finch. I took from the sideboard, on which supper was waiting, the materials I wanted; set the kettle boiling; made my renovating mixture; and advanced to the door with it--followed from first to last, move where I might, by the staring and scandalized eyes of Mr. Finch. The moment in which I opened the door was also the moment in which the rector recovered himself. "Permit me to inquire, Madame Pratolungo," he said with his loftiest emphasis, "in what capacity are You here?"

"In the capacity of Oscar's friend," I answered. "You will get rid of us both tomorrow." I banged the door behind me, and went up-stairs. If I had been Mr. Finch's wife, I believe I should have ended in making quite an agreeable man of him.

Mrs. Finch met me in the passage on the first floor, and pointed out Oscar's room. I found him walking backwards and forwards restlessly. The first words he said alluded to his brother's letter. I had arranged not to disturb him by any reference to that painful matter until the next morning; and I tried to change the topic. It was useless. There was an anxiety in his mind which was not to be dismissed at will. He insisted on my instantly setting that anxiety at rest.

"I don't want to see the letter," he said. "I only want to know all that it says about Lucilla."

"All that it says may be summed up in this. Lucilla is perfectly safe."

He caught me by the arm, and looked me searchingly in the face.

"Where?" he asked. "With him?"

"With a married lady who is a relative of his."

He dropped my arm, and considered for a moment.

"My cousin at Sydenham!" he exclaimed.

"Do you know the house?"

"Perfectly well."

"We will go there to-morrow. Let that content you for tonight. Get to rest."

I gave him my hand. He took it mechanically--absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Didn't I say something foolish down stairs?" he asked, putting the question suddenly, with an odd suspicious look at me.

"You were quite worn out," I said, consolingly. "Nobody noticed it."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure. Good night."

I left the room, feeling much as I had felt at the station at Marseilles. I was not satisfied with him. I thought his conduct very strange.

On returning to the parlor, I found nobody there but Mrs. Finch. The rector's offended dignity had left the rector no honorable alternative but to withdraw to his own room. I ate my supper in peace; and Mrs. Finch (rocking the cradle with her foot) chattered away to her heart's content about all that had happened in my absence.

I gathered, here and there, from what she said, some particulars worth mentioning.



The new disagreement between Mr. Finch and Miss Batchford, which had driven the old lady out of the rectory almost as soon as she set foot in it, had originated in Mr. Finch's exasperating composure when he heard of his daughter's flight. He supposed, of course, that Lucilla had left Ramsgate with Oscar--whose signed settlements on his future wife were safe in Mr. Finch's possession. It was only when Miss Batchford had communicated with Grosse, and when the discovery followed which revealed the penniless Nugent as the man who had eloped with Lucilla, that Mr. Finch's parental anxiety (seeing no money likely to come of it) became roused to action. He, Miss Batchford, and Grosse, had all, in their various ways, done their best to trace the fugitives--and had all alike been baffled by the impossibility of discovering the residence of the lady mentioned in Nugent's letter. My telegram, announcing my return to England with Oscar, had inspired them with their first hope of being able to interfere, and stop the marriage before it was too late.

The occurrence of Grosse's name in Mrs. Finch's rambling narrative, recalled to my memory what the rector had told me at the garden gate. I had not yet received the letter which the German had sent to wait my arrival at Dimchurch. After a short search, we found it--where it had been contemptuously thrown by Mr. Finch--on the parlor table.

A few lines comprised the whole letter. Grosse informed me that he had so fretted himself about Lucilla, that he had been attacked by "a visitation of gout." It was impossible to move his "foots" without instantly plunging into the torture of the infernal regions. "If it is you, my goot dear, who are going to find her," he concluded, "come to me first in London. I have something most dismal-serious to say to you about our poor little Feench's eyes."

No words can tell how that last sentence startled and grieved me. Mrs. Finch increased my anxiety and alarm by repeating what she had heard Miss Batchford say, during her brief visit to the rectory, on the subject of Lucilla's sight. Grosse had been seriously dissatisfied with the state of his patient's eyes, when he had seen them as long ago as the fourth of the month; and, on the morning of the next day, the servant had reported Lucilla as being hardly able to distinguish objects in the view from the window of her room. Later on the same day, she had secretly left Ramsgate; and Grosse's letter proved that she had not been near her surgical attendant since.

Weary as I was after the journey, this miserable news kept me waking long after I had gone to my bed. The next morning, I was up with the servants--impatient to start for London, by the first train.