

CHAPTER THE FORTY-EIGHTH

On the Way to the End. Second Stage

EARLY riser as I was, I found that Oscar had risen earlier still. He had left the rectory and had disturbed Mr. Gootheridge's morning slumbers by an application at the inn for the key of Browndown.

On his return to the rectory, he merely said that he had been to see after various things belonging to him, which were still left in the empty house. His look and manner as he gave us this brief explanation were, to my mind, more unsatisfactory than ever. I made no remark; and, observing that his loose traveling coat was buttoned awry over the breast, I set it right for him. My hand, as I did this, touched his breast-pocket. He started back directly--as if there was something in the pocket which he did not wish me to feel. Was it something he had brought from Browndown?

We got away--encumbered by Mr. Finch, who insisted on attaching himself to Oscar--by the first express train, which took us straight to London. Comparison of time-tables, on reaching the terminus, showed that I had leisure to spare for a brief visit to Grosse, before we again took the railway back to Sydenham. Having decided not to mention the bad news about Lucilla's sight to Oscar, until I had seen the German first, I made the best excuse that suggested itself, and drove away--leaving the two gentlemen in the waiting-room at the station.

I found Grosse confined to his easy-chair, with his gouty foot enveloped in cool cabbage-leaves. Between pain and anxiety, his eyes were wilder, his broken English was more grotesque than ever. When I appeared at the door of his room and said good morning--in the frenzy of his impatience he shook his fist at me.

"Good morning go-damn!" he roared out, "Where? where? where is Feench?"

I told him where we believed Lucilla to be. Grosse turned his head, and shook his fist at a bottle on the chimney-piece next.

"Get that bottles on the chimney," he said. "And the eye-baths by the side of him. Don't stop with your talky-talky-chatterations here. Go! Save her eyes. Look! You do this. You throw her head back--soh!" He illustrated the position so forcibly with his own head that he shook his gouty foot, and

screamed with the pain of it. He went on nevertheless, glaring frightfully through his spectacles; gnashing his mustache fiercely between his teeth. "Throw her head back. Fill the eye-baths; turn him upsides-down over her open eyes. Drown them turn-turn-about in my mixtures. Drown them, I say, one-down-todder-come-on, and if she screech never mind it. Then bring her to me. For the love of Gott, bring her to me. If you tie her hands and foote, bring her to me. What is the womans stopping for? Go! go! go!"

"I want to ask you a question about Oscar," I said, "before I go."

He seized the pillow which supported his head--evidently intending to expedite my departure by throwing it at me. I produced the railway timetable as the best defensive weapon at my command. "Look at it for yourself," I said; "and you will see that I must wait at the station, if I don't wait here."

With some difficulty, I satisfied him that it was impossible to leave London for Sydenham before a certain hour, and that I had at least ten minutes to spare which might be just as well passed in consulting him. He closed his glaring eyes, and laid his head back on the chair, thoroughly exhausted with his own outbreak of excitement. "No matter how things goes," he said, "a womans must wag her tongue. Goot. Wag yours."

"I am placed in a very difficult position," I began. "Oscar is going with me to Lucilla. I shall of course take care, in the first place, that he and Nugent do not meet, unless I am present at the interview. But I am not equally sure of what I ought to do in the case of Lucilla. Must I keep them apart until I have first prepared her to see Oscar?"

"Let her see the devil himself if you like," growled Grosse, "so long as you bring her here afterwards--directly to me. You will do the bettermost thing, if you prepare Oscar. She wants no preparations! She is enough disappointed in him as it is!"

"Disappointed in him!" I repeated. "I don't understand you."

He settled himself wearily in his chair, and referred, in a softened and saddened tone, to that private conversation of his with Lucilla, at Ramsgate, which has already been reported in the Journal. I was now informed, for the first time, of those changes in her sensations and in her ways of thinking which had so keenly vexed and mortified her. I heard of the ominous absence of the old thrill of pleasure, when Nugent took her hand on meeting her at the seaside--I heard how bitterly his personal appearance had disappointed her (when she had seen his features in detail) by comparison

with the charming ideal picture which she had formed of her lover in the days of her blindness: those happier days, as she had called them, when she was Poor Miss Finch.

"Surely," I said, "all the old feelings will come back to her when she sees Oscar?"

"They will never come back to her--no, not if she sees fifty Oscars!"

He was beginning to frighten me, or to irritate me--I can hardly say which. I only know that I persisted in disputing with him. "When she sees the true man," I went on, "do you mean to say she will feel the same disappointment---?"

I could get no farther than that. He cut me short there, without ceremony.

"You foolish womans!" he interposed, "she will feel more than the same. I have told you already it was one enormous disappointments to her when she saw the handsome brodder with the fair complexions. Ask your own self what it will be when she sees the ugly brodder with the blue face. I tell you this!--she will think your true man the worst impostor of the two."

There I indignantly contradicted him.

"His face may be a disappointment to her," I said--"I own that. But there it will end. Her hand will tell her, when he takes it, that there is no impostor deceiving her this time."

"Her hand will tell her nothing--no more than yours. I had not so much hard hearts in me as to say that to her, when she asked me. I say it to you. Hold your tongue and listen. All those thrill-tingles that she once had when he touched her, belong to anodder time--the time gone-by when her sight was in her fingers and not in her eyes. With those fine-superfine-feelings of the days when she was blind, she pays now for her grand new privilege of opening her eyes on the world. (And worth the price too!) Do you understand yet? It is a sort of swop-bargain between Nature and this poor girls of ours. I take away your eyes--I give you your fine touch. I give you your eyes--I take away your fine touch. Soh! that is plain. You see now."

I was too mortified and too miserable to answer him. Through all our later troubles, I had looked forward so confidently to Oscar's re-appearance as the one sufficient condition on which Lucilla's happiness would be certainly restored! What had become of my anticipations now? I sat silent; staring in

stupid depression at the pattern of the carpet. Grosse took out his watch.

"Your ten-minutes-time has counted himself out," he said.

I neither moved nor heeded him. His ferocious eyes began to flame again behind his monstrous spectacles.

"Go-be-off-with-you!" he shouted at me as if I was deaf. "Her eyes! her eyes! While you stop chatterboxing here, her eyes are in danger. What with her frettings and her cryings and her damn-nonsense-lofe-business, I swear you my solemn oath her sight was in danger when I saw her a whole fortnight gone-by. Do you want my big pillow to fly bang at your head? You don't want him? Be-off-away with you then, or you will have him in one-two-three time! Be-off-away--and bring her back to me before night!"

I returned to the railway. Of all the women whom I passed in the crowded streets, I doubt if one had a heavier heart in her bosom that morning than mine.

To make matters worse still, my traveling companions (one in the refreshment-room, and one pacing the platform) received my account of my interview with Grosse in a manner which seriously disappointed and discouraged me. Mr. Finch's inhuman conceit treated my melancholy news of his daughter as a species of complimentary tribute to his own foresight.

"You remember, Madame Pratolungo, I took high ground in this matter from the first. I protested against the proceedings of the man Grosse, as involving a purely worldly interference with the ways of an inscrutable Providence. With what effect? My paternal influence was repudiated; my Moral Weight was, so to speak, set aside. And now you see the result. Take it to heart, dear friend. May it be a warning to you!" He sighed with ponderous complacency, and turned from me to the girl behind the counter. "I will take another cup of tea."

Oscar's reception of me, when I found him on the platform, and told him next of Lucilla's critical state, was more than discouraging. It is no exaggeration to say that he alarmed me. "Another item in the debt I owe to Nugent!" he said. Not a word of sympathy, not a word of sorrow. That vindictive answer, and nothing more.

We started for Sydenham.

From time to time, I looked at Oscar sitting opposite to me, to see if any

change appeared in him as we drew nearer and nearer to the place in which Lucilla was now living. No! Still the same ominous silence, the same unnatural self-repression possessed him.

Except the momentary outbreak, when Mr. Finch had placed Nugent's letter in his hand on the previous evening, not the faintest token of what was really going on in his mind had escaped him since we had left Marseilles. He, who could weep over all his other griefs as easily and as spontaneously as a woman, had not shed a tear since the fatal day when he had discovered that his brother had played him false--that brother who had been the god of his idolatry, the sacred object of his gratitude and his love! When a man of Oscar's temperament becomes frozen up for days together in his own thoughts--when he keeps his own counsel; when he asks for no sympathy, and utters no complaint--the sign is a serious one. There are hidden forces gathering in him which will burst their way to the surface--for good or for evil--with an irresistible result. Watching Oscar attentively behind my veil, I felt the certain assurance that the part he would take in the terrible conflict of interests now awaiting us, would be a part which I should remember to the latest day of my life.

We reached Sydenham, and went to the nearest hotel.

On the railway--with other travelers in the carriage--it had been impossible to consult on the safest method of approaching Lucilla, in the first instance. That serious question now pressed for instant decision. We sat down to discuss it, in the room which we had hired at the hotel.