

## CHAPTER THE FORTY-NINTH

On the Way to the End. Third Stage

ON former occasions of doubt or difficulty, it had always been Oscar's habit to follow the opinions of others. On this occasion he was the first to speak, and to assert an opinion of his own.

"It seems needless to waste time in discussing our different views," he said. "There is only one thing to be done. I am the person principally concerned in this matter. Wait here, while I go to the house."

He spoke without any of his usual hesitation; he took up his hat without looking either at Mr. Finch or at me. I felt more and more convinced that the influence which Nugent's vile breach of confidence had exerted over Oscar's mind, was an influence which had made a dangerous man of him. Resolved to prevent him from leaving us, I insisted on his returning to his chair, and hearing what I had to say. At the same moment, Mr. Finch rose, and placed himself between Oscar and the door. Seeing this, I thought it might be wise if I kept my interference in reserve, and allowed the rector to speak first.

"Wait a moment, Oscar," said Mr. Finch, gravely. "You are forgetting Me."

Oscar waited doggedly, hat in hand.

Mr. Finch paused, evidently considering what words he should use before he spoke again. His respect for Oscar's pecuniary position was great; but his respect for himself--especially at the present crisis--was, if possible, greater still. In deference to the first sentiment he was as polite, and in deference to the second he was as positive, in phrasing his remonstrance, as a man could be. "Permit me to remind you, dear Oscar, that my claim to interfere, as Lucilla's father, is at least equal to yours," proceeded the rector. "In the hour of my daughter's need, it is my parental duty to be present. If you go to your cousin's house, my position imperatively requires that I should go too." Oscar's reception of this proposal confirmed the grave apprehensions with which he had inspired me. He flatly refused to have Mr. Finch for a companion.

"Excuse me," he answered shortly. "I wish to go to the house alone."

"Permit me to ask your reason," said the rector, still preserving his

conciliatory manner.

"I wish to see my brother in private," Oscar replied, with his eyes on the ground.

Mr. Finch, still restraining himself, but still not moving from the door, looked at me. I hastened to interfere before there was any serious disagreement between them.

"I venture to think," I said, "that you are both wrong. Whether one of you goes, or both of you go, the result will be the same. The chances are a hundred to one, against your being admitted into the house."

They both turned on me together, and asked what I meant.

"You can't force your way in," I said. "You must do one of two things. You must either give your names to the servant at the door, or you must withhold your names. If you give them, you warn Nugent of what is coming--and he is not the man to let you into the house under those circumstances. If you take the other way, and keep your names concealed, you present yourselves as strangers. Is Nugent likely to be accessible to strangers? Would Lucilla, in her present position, consent to receive two men who are unknown to her? Take my word for it--you will not only gain nothing if you go to the house you will actually make it more difficult to communicate with Lucilla than it is already."

There was a moment's silence. Both the men felt that my objections were not easy to answer. Once more, Oscar took the lead.

"Do you propose to go?" he asked.

"No," I answered. "I propose to send a letter to Lucilla. A letter will find its way to her."

This again was unanswerable. Oscar inquired next what the purport of the letter was to be. I replied that I proposed to ask her to grant me a private interview--nothing more.

"Suppose Lucilla refuses?" said Mr. Finch.

"She will not refuse," I rejoined. "There was a little misunderstanding between us--I admit--at the time when I went abroad. I mean to refer frankly to that misunderstanding as my reason for writing. I shall put your

daughter on her honor to give me an opportunity of setting things right between us. If I summon Lucilla to do an act of justice, I believe she will not refuse me."

(This, let me add in parenthesis, was the plan of action which I had formed on the way to Sydenham. I had only waited to mention it, until I heard what the two men proposed to do first.)

Oscar, standing hat in hand, glanced at Mr. Finch (also hat in hand) keeping obstinately near the door. If he persisted in carrying out his purpose of going alone to his cousin's house, the rector's face and manner expressed, with the politest plainness, the intention of following him. Oscar was placed between a clergyman and a woman, both equally determined to have their own way. Under those circumstances, there was no alternative--unless he wished to produce a public scandal--but to yield, or appear to yield, to one or the other of us. He selected me.

"If you succeed in seeing her," he asked, "what do you mean to do?"

"I mean either to bring her back with me here to her father and to you, or to make an appointment with her to see you both where she is now living," I replied.

Oscar--after another look at the immovable rector--rang the bell, and ordered writing materials.

"One more question," he said. "Assuming that Lucilla receives you at the house, do you intend to see----?" He stopped; his eyes shrank from meeting mine. "Do you intend to see anybody else?" he resumed: still evading the plain utterance of his brother's name.

"I intend to see nobody but Lucilla," I answered. "It is no business of mine to interfere between you and your brother." (Heaven forgive me for speaking in that way to him, while I had the firm resolution to interfere between them in my mind all the time!)

"Write your letter," he said, "on condition that I see the reply."

"It is needless, I presume, for me to make the same stipulation?" added the rector. "In my parental capacity--"

I recognized his parental capacity, before he could say any more. "You shall both see the reply," I said--and sat down to my letter; writing merely what I

had told them I should write: "Dear Lucilla, I have just returned from the Continent. For the sake of justice, and for the sake of old times, let me see you immediately--without mentioning our appointment to anybody. I pledge myself to satisfy you, in five minutes, that I have never been unworthy of your affection and your confidence. The bearer waits for your reply."

I handed those lines to the two gentlemen to read. Mr. Finch made no remark--he was palpably dissatisfied at the secondary position which he occupied. Oscar said, "I see no objection to the letter. I will do nothing until I have read the answer." With those words, he dictated to me his cousin's address. I gave the letter myself to one of the servants at the hotel.

"Is it far from here?" I asked.

"Barely ten minutes' walk, ma'am."

"You understand that you are to wait for an answer?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He went out. As well as I can remember, an interval of at least half an hour passed before his return. You will form some idea of the terrible oppression of suspense that now laid its slowly-torturing weight on all three of us, when I tell you that not one word was spoken in the room from the time when the servant went out, to the time when the servant came in again.

When the man returned he had a letter in his hand!

My fingers shook so that I could hardly open it. Before I had read a word, the sight of the writing struck a sudden chill through me. The body of the note was written by the hand of a stranger! And the signature at the end was traced in the large straggling childish characters which I remembered so well, when Lucilla had written her first letter to Oscar in the days when she was blind!

The note was expressed in these strange words:--"I cannot receive you here; but I can, and will, come to you at your hotel if you will wait for me. I am not able to appoint a time. I can only promise to watch for my first opportunity, and to take advantage of it instantly--for your sake and for mine."

But one interpretation could be placed on such language as this. Lucilla was not a free agent. Both Oscar and the rector were now obliged to acknowledge that my view of the case had been the correct one. If it was impossible for

me to be received into the house, how doubly impossible would it be for the men to gain admission! Oscar, after reading the note, withdrew to the further end of the room; keeping his thoughts to himself. Mr. Finch decided on stepping out of his secondary position by forthwith taking a course of his own.

"Am I to infer," he began, "that it is really useless for me to attempt to see my own child?"

"Her letter speaks for itself," I replied. "If you attempt to see her, you will probably be the means of preventing your daughter from coming here."

"In my parental capacity," continued Mr. Finch, "it is impossible for me to remain passive. As a brother-clergyman, I have, I conceive, a claim on the rector of the parish. It is quite likely that notice may have been already given of this fraudulent marriage. In that case, it is not only my duty to myself and my child--it is my duty to the Church, to confer with my reverend colleague. I go to confer with him." He strutted to the door, and added, "If Lucilla arrives in my absence, I invest you with my authority, Madame Pratolungo, to detain her until my return." With that parting charge to me, he walked out.

I looked at Oscar. He came slowly towards me from the other end of the room.

"You will wait here, of course?" he said.

"Of course. And you?"

"I shall go out for a little while."

"For any particular purpose?"

"No. To get through the time. I am weary of waiting."

I felt positively assured, from the manner in which he answered me, that he was going--now he had got rid of Mr. Finch--straight to his cousin's house.

"You forget," I said, "that Lucilla may come here while you are out. Your presence in the room, or in the room next to this, may be of the greatest importance, when I tell her what your brother has done. Suppose she refuses to believe me? What am I to do if I have not got you to appeal to? In your own interests, as well as in Lucilla's, I request you to remain here with

me till she comes."

Putting it on that ground only, I waited to see what he would do. After a certain hesitation, he answered with a sullen assumption of indifference, "Just as you please!"--and walked away again towards the other end of the room. As he turned his back on me, I heard him say to himself, "It's only waiting a little longer!"

"Waiting for what?" I asked.

He looked round at me over his shoulder.

"Patience for the present!" he answered. "You will hear soon enough." For the moment, I said no more to him. The tone in which he had replied warned me that it would be useless.

After an interval--how long an interval I cannot well say--I heard the sound of women's dresses in the passage outside.

The instant after, there was a knock at the door.

I signed to Oscar to open a second door, close by him at the lower end of the room, and (for the moment at least) to keep out of sight. Then I answered the knock, and said as steadily as I could, "Come in."

A woman unknown to me entered, dressed like a respectable servant. She came in leading Lucilla by the hand. My first look at my darling told me the horrible truth. As I had seen her in the corridor at the rectory on the first day we met, so I now saw her once more. Again, the sightless eyes turned on me, insensibly reflecting the light that fell on them. Blind! Oh, God, after a few brief weeks of sight, blind again!

In that miserable discovery, I forgot everything else. I flew to her, and caught her in my arms. I cast one look at her pale, wasted face--and burst out crying on her bosom.

She held my head gently with one hand, and waited with the patience of an angel until that first outbreak of my grief had exhausted itself. "Don't cry about my blindness," said the soft, sweet voice that I knew so well. "The days when I had my sight have been the unhappiest days of my life. If I look as if I had been fretting, don't think it is about my eyes." She paused, and sighed bitterly. "I may tell you," she went on in a whisper. "It's a relief, it's a consolation, to tell you. I am fretting about my marriage."

Those words roused me. I lifted my head, and kissed her. "I have come back to comfort you," I said: "and I have behaved like a fool."

She smiled faintly. "How like you," she exclaimed, "to say that!" She tapped my cheek with her fingers in the old familiar way. The repetition of that little trifling action almost broke my heart. I nearly choked myself in forcing back the stupid cowardly useless tears that tried to burst from me again. "Come!" she said. "No more crying! Let us sit down and talk as if we were at Dimchurch."

I took her to the sofa: we sat side by side. She put her arm round my waist, and laid her head on my shoulder. Again the faint smile flickered like a dying light on her lovely face; wan and wasted, yet still beautiful--still the Virgin's face in Raphael's picture. "We are a strange pair," she said, with a momentary flash of her old irresistible humour. "You are my bitterest enemy, and you burst out crying over me the moment we meet. I have been shockingly treated by you--and I have got my arm round your waist and my head on your shoulder, and I wouldn't let go of you for the world!" Her face saddened again; her voice suddenly altered its tone. "Tell me," she went on, "how is it that appearances were so terribly against you? Oscar satisfied me, at Ramsgate, that I ought to give you up, that I ought never to see you again. I took his view--there is no denying it, my dear--I agreed with him in detesting you, for a little while. But, when the blindness came back, I could keep it up no longer. Little by little, as the light died out, my heart would turn to you again. When I heard your letter read, when I knew that you were near me--it was just like the old times; I was mad to see you. And here I am--satisfied, before you explain it to me, that you have been the victim of some terrible mistake."

I tried, in grateful acknowledgment of those generous words, to enter on my justification there and then. It was impossible. I could think of nothing, I could speak of nothing, but the dreadful discovery of her blindness.

"Give me a few minutes," I said, "and you shall hear it all. I can't talk of myself, yet--I can only talk of you. Oh, Lucilla, why did you keep away from Grosse? Come with me to him to-day. Let him try what he can do. At once, my love--before it is too late!"

"It is too late," she said. "I have been to another oculist--a stranger. He said, what Mr. Sebright said: he doubted if there was ever any chance for me: he thought the operation ought never to have been performed."

"Why did you go to a stranger?" I asked. "Why did you give up Grosse!"

"You must ask Oscar," she answered. "It was at his desire that I kept away from Grosse."

Hearing this, I penetrated for myself the motive which had actuated Nugent--as I afterwards found it indicated in the Journal. If he had let Lucilla go to Grosse, our good German might have noticed that her position was preying on her mind, and might have seen his reasons for exposing the deception that Nugent was practicing on her. For the rest, I still persisted in entreating Lucilla to go back with me to our old friend.

"Remember our conversation on this very subject," she rejoined, shaking her head decisively. "I mean at the time when the operation was going to be performed. I told you I was used to being blind. I said I only wanted to recover my sight, to see Oscar. And when I did see him--what happened? The disappointment was so dreadful, I wished myself blind again. Don't start! don't cry out as if you were shocked! I mean what I say. You people who can see, attach such an absurd importance to your eyes! Don't you recollect my saying that, when we last talked about it?"

I recollected perfectly. She had said those words. She had declared that she had never honestly envied any of us the use of our eyes. She had even reviled our eyes; comparing them contemptuously with her touch; deriding them as deceivers who were constantly leading us wrong. I acknowledged all this--without being in the least reconciled to the catastrophe that had happened. If she would only have listened to me, I should still have gone on obstinately pleading with her. But she flatly refused to listen. "We have very little time to spare," she said. "Let us talk of something more interesting before I am obliged to leave you."

"Obliged to leave me?" I repeated. "Are you not your own mistress?"

Her face clouded over; her manner became embarrassed.

"I cannot honestly tell you that I am a prisoner," she answered. "I can only say I am watched. When Oscar is away from me, Oscar's cousin--a sly, suspicious, false woman--always contrives to put herself in his place. I heard her say to her husband that she believed I should break my marriage engagement unless I was closely looked after. I don't know what I should do, but for one of the servants in the house, who is an excellent creature--who sympathizes with me, and helps me." She stopped, and lifted her head inquiringly. "Where is the servant?" she asked.



I had forgotten the woman who had brought her into the room. She must have delicately left us together after leading Lucilla in. When I looked up, she was not to be seen.

"The servant is no doubt waiting down-stairs," I said. "Go on."

"But for that good creature," Lucilla resumed, "I should never have got here. She brought me your letter, and read it to me, and wrote my reply. I arranged with her to slip out at the first opportunity. One chance was in our favor--we had only the cousin to keep an eye on us. Oscar was not in the house."

She suddenly checked herself at the last word. A slight sound at the lower end of the room, which had passed unnoticed by me, had caught her delicate ear, "What is that noise?" she asked. "Anybody in the room with us?"

I looked up once more. While she was talking of the false Oscar, the true Oscar was standing listening to her, at the other end of the room.

When he discovered that I was looking at him, he entreated me by a gesture not to betray his presence. He had evidently heard what we had been saying to each other, before I detected him--for he touched his eyes, and lifted his hands pityingly in allusion to Lucilla's blindness. Whatever his mood might be, that melancholy discovery must surely have affected him--Lucilla's influence over him now, could only be an influence for good. I signed to him to remain--and told Lucilla that there was nothing to be alarmed about. She went on.

"Oscar left us for London early this morning," she said. "Can you guess what he has gone for? He has gone to get the Marriage License--he has given notice of the marriage at the church. My last hope is in you. In spite of everything that I can say to him, he has fixed the day for the twenty-first--in two days more! I have done all I could to put it off; I have insisted on every possible delay. Oh, if you knew----!" Her rising agitation stifled her utterance at the moment. "I mustn't waste the precious minutes; I must get back before Oscar returns," she went on, rallying again. "Oh, my old friend, you are never at a loss; you always know what to do! Find me some way of putting off my marriage. Suggest something which will take them by surprise, and force them to give me time!"

I looked towards the lower end of the room. Listening in breathless interest,

Oscar had noiselessly advanced half-way towards us. At a sign from me, he checked himself and came no farther.

"Do you really mean, Lucilla, that you no longer love him?" I said.

"I can tell you nothing about it," she answered--"except that some dreadful change has come over me. While I had my sight, I could partly account for it--I believed that the new sense had made a new being of me. But now I have lost my sight again--now I am once more what I have been all my life--still the same horrible insensibility possesses me. I have so little feeling for him, that I sometimes find it hard to persuade myself that he really is Oscar. You know how I used to adore him. You know how enchanted I should once have been to marry him. Think of what I must suffer, feeling towards him as I feel now!"

I looked up again. Oscar had stolen nearer; I could see his face plainly. The good influence of Lucilla was beginning to do its good work! I saw the tears rising in his eyes; I saw love and pity taking the place of hatred and revenge. The Oscar of my old recollections was standing before me once more!

"I don't want to go away," Lucilla went on; "I don't want to leave him. All I ask for, is a little more time. Time must help me to get back again to my old self. My blind days have been the days of my whole life. Can a few weeks of sight have deprived me of the feelings which have been growing in me for years? I won't believe it! I can find my way about the house; I can tell things by my touch; I can do all that I did in my blindness, just as well as ever, now I am blind again. The feeling for him will come back to me like the rest. Only give me time! only give me time!"

At the last word, she started to her feet in sudden alarm. "There is some one in the room," she said. "Some one who is crying! Who is it?"

Oscar was close to us. The tears were falling fast over his cheeks--the one faint sobbing breath which had escaped him had caught my ear as well as Lucilla's. I took his hand in one of my hands; and I took Lucilla's hand in the other. For good or for evil, the result rested with God's mercy. The time had come.

"Who is it?" Lucilla repeated impatiently.

"Try if you can tell, my love, without asking me."

With those words, I put her hand in Oscar's hand--and stood close,

watching her face.

For one awful moment, when she first felt the familiar touch, the blood left her cheeks. Her blind eyes dilated fearfully. She stood petrified. Then, with a long low cry--a cry of breathless rapture--she flung her arms passionately round his neck. The life flowed back into her face; her lovely smile just trembled on her parted lips; her breath came faint and quick and fluttering. In soft tones of ecstasy, with her lips on his cheek, she murmured the delicious words:

"Oh, Oscar! I know you once more!"