

CHAPTER THE FIFTIETH

The End of the Journey

A LITTLE interval of time elapsed.

Her first exquisite sense of the recognition by touch had passed away. Her mind had recovered its balance. She separated herself from Oscar, and turned to me, with the one inevitable question which I knew must follow the joining of their hands.

"What does it mean?"

The exposure of Nugent's perfidy; the revelation of the fatal secret of Oscar's face; and, last not least, the defence of my own conduct towards her, were all comprehended in the answer for which that question called. As carefully, as delicately, as mercifully as I could, I disclosed to her the whole truth. How the shock affected her, she did not tell me at the time, and has never told me since. With her hand in Oscar's hand, with her face hidden on Oscar's breast, she listened; not once interrupting me, from first to last, by so much as a single word. Now and then, I saw her tremble; now and then I heard her sigh heavily. That was all. It was only when I had ended--it was only after a long interval during which Oscar and I watched her in speechless anxiety--that she slowly lifted her head and broke the silence.

"Thank God," we heard her say to herself fervently--"Thank God, I am blind."

Those were her first words. They filled me with horror. I cried out to her to recall them.

She quietly laid her head back on Oscar's breast.

"Why should I recall them?" she asked. "Do you think I wish to see him disfigured as he is now? No! I wish to see him--and I do see him!--as my fancy drew his picture in the first days of our love. My blindness is my blessing. It has given me back my old delightful sensation when I touch him; it keeps my own beloved image of him--the one image I care for--unchanged and unchangeable. You will persist in thinking that my happiness depends on my sight. I look back with horror at what I suffered when I had my sight--my one effort is to forget that miserable time. Oh, how little you know of me! Oh, what a shock it would be to me, if I saw him as you see him! Try to

understand me, and you won't talk of my loss--you will talk of my gain."

"Your gain?" I repeated. "What have you gained?"

"Happiness," she answered. "My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness."

There was the story of her whole existence--told in two words!

If you had seen her radiant face as she raised it again in the excitement of speaking; if you had remembered (as I remembered) what her surgeon had said of the penalty which she must inevitably pay for the recovery of her sight--how would you have answered her? It is barely possible, perhaps, that you might have done what I did. That is to say: You might have modestly admitted that she knew what the conditions of her happiness were better than you--and you might not have answered her at all!

I left them to talk together, and took a turn in the room, considering with myself what we were to do next.

It was not easy to say. The barren information which I had received from my darling was all the information that I possessed. Nugent had unflinchingly carried his cruel deception to its end. He had falsely given notice of his marriage at the church, in his brother's name; and he was now in London, falsely obtaining his Marriage License, in his brother's name also. So much I knew of his proceedings--and no more.

While I was still pondering, Lucilla cut the Gordian knot.

"Why are we stopping here?" she asked. "Let us go--and never return to this hateful place again!"

As she rose to her feet, we were startled by a soft knock at the door.

I answered the knock. The woman who had brought Lucilla to the hotel appeared once more. She seemed to be afraid to venture far from the door. Standing just inside the room, she looked nervously at Lucilla, and said, "Can I speak to you, Miss?"

"You can say anything you like, before this lady and gentleman," Lucilla answered. "What is it?"

"I'm afraid we have been followed, Miss."

"Followed? By whom?"

"By the lady's maid. I saw her, a little while since, looking up at the hotel--and then she went back in a hurry on the way to the house--and that's not the worse of it, Miss."

"What else has happened?"

"We have made a mistake about the railway," said the woman. "There's a train from London that we didn't notice in the timetable. They tell me downstairs it came in more than a quarter of an hour ago. Please to come back, Miss--or I fear we shall be found out."

"You can go back at once, Jane," said Lucilla.

"By myself?"

"Yes. Thank you for bringing me here--here I remain."

She had barely taken her seat again between Oscar and me, before the door was softly opened from the outside. A long thin nervous hand stole in through the opening; took the servant by the arm; and drew her out into the passage. In her place, a man entered the room with his hat on. The man was Nugent Dubourg.

He stopped where the servant had stopped. He looked at Lucilla; he looked at his brother; he looked at me.

Not a word fell from him. There he stood, fronting the friend whom he had calumniated and the brother whom he had betrayed. There he stood--with his eyes fixed on Lucilla, sitting between us--knowing that it was all over; knowing that the woman for whom he had degraded himself, was a woman parted from him for ever. There he stood, in the hell of his own making--and devoured his torture in silence.

On his brother's appearance, Oscar had risen, and had raised Lucilla with him. He now advanced a step towards Nugent, still holding to him his betrothed wife.

I followed them, eagerly watching his face. There was no fear in me now of what he might do. Lucilla's blessed influence had found, and cast out, the lurking demon that had been hidden in him. With a mind attentive but not

alarmed, I waited to see how he would meet the emergency that confronted him.

"Nugent!" he said, very quietly.

Nugent's head drooped--he made no answer.

Lucilla, hearing Oscar pronounce the name, instantly understood what had happened. She shuddered with horror. Oscar gently placed her in my arms, and advanced again alone towards his brother. His face expressed the struggle in him of some subtly-mingling influences of love and anguish, of sorrow and shame. He recalled to me in the strangest manner my past experience of him, when he had first trusted me with the story of the Trial, and when he had told me that Nugent was the good angel of his life.

He went up to the place at which his brother was standing. In the simple, boyish way, so familiar to me in the bygone time, he laid his hand on his brother's arm.

"Nugent!" he said. "Are you the same dear good brother who saved me from dying on the scaffold, and who cheered my hard life afterwards? Are you the same bright, clever, noble fellow that I was always so fond of, and so proud of?"

He paused, and removed his brother's hat. With careful, caressing hand, he parted his brother's ruffled hair over the forehead. Nugent's head sank lower. His face was distorted, his hands were clenched, in the dumb agony of remembrance which that tender voice and that kind hand had set loose in him. Oscar gave him time to recover himself: Oscar spoke next to me.

"You know Nugent," he said. "You remember when we first met, my telling you that Nugent was an angel? You saw for yourself, when he came to Dimchurch, how kindly he helped me; how faithfully he kept my secrets; what a true friend he was. Look at him--and you will feel, as I do, that we have misunderstood and misinterpreted him, in some monstrous way." He turned again to Nugent. "I daren't tell you," he went on, "what I have heard about you, and what I have believed about you, and what vile unbrotherly thoughts I have had of being revenged on you. Thank God, they are gone! My dear fellow, I look back at them--now I see you--as I might look back at a horrible dream. How can I see you, Nugent, and believe that you have been false to me? You, a villain who has tried to rob poor Me of the only woman in the world who cares for me! You, so handsome and so popular, who may marry any woman you like! It can't be. You have drifted innocently into

some false position without knowing it. Defend yourself. No. Let me defend you. You shan't humble yourself to anybody. Tell me how you have really acted towards Lucilla, and towards me--and leave it to your brother to set you right with everybody. Come, Nugent! lift up your head--and tell me what I shall say."

Nugent lifted his head, and looked at Oscar.

Ghastly as his face was, I saw something in his eyes, when he first fixed them on his brother, which again reminded me of past days--the days when he had joined us at Dimchurch, and when he used to talk of "poor Oscar" in the tender, light-hearted way that first won me. I thought once more of the memorable night-interview between us at Browndown, when Oscar had left England. Again, I called to mind the signs which had told of the nobler nature of the man pleading with him. Again, I remembered the remorse which had moved him to tears--the effort he had made in my presence to atone for past misdoing, and to struggle for the last time against the guilty passion that possessed him. Was the nature which could feel that remorse utterly depraved? Was the man who had made that effort--the last of many that had gone before it--irredeemably bad?

"Wait!" I whispered to Lucilla, trembling and weeping in my arms. "He will deserve our sympathy; he will win our pardon and our pity yet!"

"Come!" Oscar repeated. "Tell me what I shall say."

Nugent drew from his pocket a sheet of paper with writing on it.

"Say," he answered, "that I gave notice of your marriage at the church here--and that I went to London and got you this."

He handed the sheet of paper to his brother. It was the Marriage License, taken out in his brother's name.

"Be happy, Oscar," he added. "You deserve it."

He threw one arm in his old easy protecting way round his brother. His hand, as he did this, touched the breast-pocket of Oscar's coat. Before it was possible to stop him, his dexterous fingers had opened the pocket, and had taken from it a little toy-pistol with a chased silver handle of Oscar's own workmanship.

"Was this for me?" he asked, with a faint smile. "My poor boy! you could

never have done it, could you?" He kissed Oscar's dark cheek, and put the pistol into his own pocket. "The handle is your work," he said. "I shall take it as your present to me. Return to Browndown when you are married. I am going to travel again. You shall hear from me before I leave England. God bless you, Oscar. Good-bye."

He put his brother back from him with a firm and gentle hand. I attempted to advance with Lucilla, and speak to him. Something in his face--looking at me out of his mournful eyes, calm, stern, and superhuman, like a look of doom--warned me back from him, and filled me with the foreboding that I should see him no more. He walked to the door, and opened it--turned--and, fixing his farewell look on Lucilla, saluted us silently with a bend of his head. The door closed on him softly. In a few minutes only from the time when he had entered the room, he had left us again--and left us for ever.

We waited, spell-bound--we could not speak. The void that he left behind him was dreary and dreadful. I was the first who moved. In silence, I led Lucilla back to our seat on the sofa, and beckoned to Oscar to go to her in my place.

This done, I left them--and went out to meet Lucilla's father, on his return to the hotel. I wished to prevent him from disturbing them. After what had happened, it was good for those two to be alone.

EPILOGUE

Madame Pratolungo's Last Words

TWELVE years have passed since the events occurred which it has been the business of these pages to relate. I am at my desk; looking idly at all the leaves of writing which my pen has filled, and asking myself if there is more yet to add, before I have done.

There is more--not much.

Oscar and Lucilla claim me first. Two days after they were restored to each other at Sydenham, they were married at the church in that place. It was a dull wedding. Nobody was in spirits but Mr. Finch. We parted in London. The bride and bridegroom returned to Browndown. The rector remained in town for a day or two visiting some friends. I went back to my father, to accompany him, as I had promised, on his journey from Marseilles to Paris.

As well as I remember, I remained a fortnight abroad. In the course of that time, I received kind letters from Browndown. One of them announced that Oscar had heard from his brother.

Nugent's letter was not a long one. It was dated at Liverpool, and it announced his embarkation for America in two hours' time. He had heard of a new expedition to the Arctic regions--then fitting out in the United States--with the object of discovering the open Polar sea, supposed to be situated between Spitzbergen and Nova Zembla. It had instantly struck him that this expedition offered an entirely new field of study to a landscape painter in search of the sublimest aspects of Nature. He had decided on volunteering to join the Arctic explorers--and he had already raised the necessary money for his outfit by the sale of the only valuables he possessed--his jewelry and his books. If he wanted more, he engaged to apply to Oscar. In any case, he promised to write again, before the expedition sailed. And so, for the present only, he would bid his brother and sister affectionately farewell.--When I afterwards looked at the letter myself, I found nothing in it which referred in the slightest degree to the past, or which hinted at the state of the writer's own health and spirits.

I returned to our remote Southdown village; and occupied the room which Lucilla had herself prepared for me at Browndown.

I found the married pair as tranquil and as happy in their union as a man and woman could be. The absent Nugent dwelt a little sadly in their minds at times, I suspect, as well as in mine. It was perhaps on this account, that Lucilla appeared to me to be quieter than she used to be in her maiden days. However, my presence did something towards restoring her to her old spirits--and Grosse's speedy arrival exerted its enlivening influence in support of mine.

As soon as the gout would let him get on his feet, he presented himself with his instruments, at Browndown, eager for another experiment on Lucilla's eyes.

"If my operations had failed," he said, "I should not have plagued you no more. But my operations has not failed: it is you who have failed to take care of your nice new eyes when I gave them to you."

In those terms he endeavored to persuade her to let him attempt another operation. She steadily refused to submit to it--and the discussion that followed roused her famously.

More than once afterwards Grosse tried to make her change her mind. He tried in vain. The disputes between the two made the house ring again. Lucilla found all her old gaiety, in refuting the grotesque arguments and persuasions of our worthy German. To me--when I once or twice attempted to shake her resolution--she replied in another way, merely repeating the words she had said to me at Sydenham: "My life lives in my love. And my love lives in my blindness." It is only right to add that Mr. Sebright, and another competent authority consulted with him, declared unhesitatingly that she was right. Under the circumstances, Mr. Sebright was of opinion that the success of Grosse's operation could never have been more than temporary. His colleague, after examining Lucilla's eyes, at a later period, entirely agreed with him. Which was in the right--these two or Grosse--who can say? As blind Lucilla, you first knew her. As blind Lucilla, you see the last of her now. If you feel inclined to regret this, remember that the one thing essential was the thing she possessed. Her life was a happy one. Bear this in mind--and don't forget that your conditions of happiness need not necessarily be her conditions also.

In the time I am now writing of, the second letter from Nugent arrived. It was written the evening before he sailed for the Polar seas. One line in it touched us deeply. "Who knows whether I shall ever see England again! If a boy is born to you, Oscar, call him by my name--for my sake."

Enclosed in this letter was a private communication from Nugent, addressed to me. It was the confession to which I have alluded in my notes attached to Lucilla's Journal. These words only were added at the end: "You now know everything. Forgive me--if you can. I have not escaped without suffering; remember that." After making use of the narrative, as you already know, I have burnt it all, except those last lines.

At distant intervals, we heard twice of the exploring ship, from whaling vessels. Then, there was a long dreary interval, without news of any sort. Then, a dreadful report that the expedition was lost. Then, the confirmation of the report--a lapse of a whole year, and no tidings of the missing men.

They were well provided with supplies of all kinds; and there was a general hope that they might be holding out. A new expedition was sent--and sent vainly--in search of them overland. Rewards were offered to whaling vessels to find them, and were never earned. We wore mourning for Nugent; we were a melancholy household. Two more years passed--before the fate of the expedition was discovered. A ship in the whale trade, driven out of her course, fell in with a wrecked and dismantled vessel, lost in the ice. Let the

last sentences of the captain's report tell the story.

"The wreck was drifting along a channel of open water, when we first saw it. Before long, it was brought up by an iceberg. I got into my boat with some of my sailors, and we rowed to the vessel.

"Not a man was to be seen on the deck, which was covered with snow. We hailed, and got no reply. I looked in through one of the circular glazed port-holes astern, and saw dimly the figure of a man seated at a table. I knocked on the thick glass, but he never moved. We got on deck, and opened the cabin hatchway, and went below. The man I had seen was before us, at the end of the cabin. I led the way, and spoke to him. He made no answer. I looked closer, and touched one of his hands which lay on the table. To my horror and astonishment, he was a frozen corpse.

"On the table before him was the last entry in the ship's log!

"Seventeen days since we have been shut up in the ice: Our fire went out yesterday. The captain tried to light it again, and has failed. The surgeon and two seamen died of cold this morning. The rest of us must soon follow. If we are ever discovered, I beg the person who finds me to send this----'

"There the hand that held the pen had dropped into the writer's lap. The left hand still lay on the table. Between the frozen fingers, we found a long lock of a woman's hair, tied at each end with a blue ribbon. The open eyes of the corpse were still fixed on the lock of hair.

"The name of this man was found in his pocket-book. It was Nugent Dubourg. I publish the name in my report, in case it may meet the eyes of his friends.

"Examination of the rest of the vessel, and comparison of dates with the date of the log-book, showed that the officers and crew had been dead for more than two years. The positions in which we found the frozen men, and the names, where it was possible to discover them, are here set forth as follows."...

That "lock of a woman's hair" is now in Lucilla's possession. It will be buried with her, at her own request, when she dies. Ah, poor Nugent! Are we not all sinners? Remember the best of him, and forget the worst, as I do.

I still linger over my writing--reluctant to leave it, if the truth must be told. But what more is there to say? I hear Oscar hammering away at his chasing,

and whistling blithely over his work. In another room, Lucilla is teaching the piano to her little girl. On my table is a letter from Mrs. Finch, dated from one of our distant colonies--over which Mr. Finch (who has risen gloriously in the world) presides pastorally as bishop. He harangues the "natives" to his heart's content: and the wonderful natives like it. "Jicks" is in her element among the aboriginal members of her father's congregation: there are fears that the wandering Arab of the Finch family will end in marrying "a chief." Mrs. Finch--I don't expect you to believe this--is anticipating another confinement. Lucilla's eldest boy--called Nugent--has just come in, and stands by my desk. He lifts his bright blue eyes up to mine; his round rosy face expresses strong disapproval of what I am doing. "Aunty," he says, "you have written enough. Come and play."

The boy is right. I must put away my manuscript and leave you. My excellent spirits are a little dashed at parting. I wonder whether you are sorry too? I shall never know! Well, I have many blessings to comfort me, on closing my relations with you. I have kind souls who love me; and--observe this!--I stand on my political principles as firmly as ever. The world is getting converted to my way of thinking: the Pratulungo programme, my friends, is coming to the front with giant steps. Long live the Republic! Farewell.

THE END www.freeclassicebooks.com