Poor Miss Finch

By

Wilkie Collins

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TO MRS. ELLIOT,

(OF THE DEANERY, BRISTOL).

WILL YOU honor me by accepting the Dedication of this book, in remembrance of an uninterrupted friendship of many years?

More than one charming blind girl, in fiction and in the drama, has preceded "Poor Miss Finch." But, so far as I know, blindness in these cases has been always exhibited, more or less exclusively, from the ideal and the sentimental point of view. The attempt here made is to appeal to an interest of another kind, by exhibiting blindness as it really is. I have carefully gathered the information necessary to the execution of this purpose from competent authorities of all sorts. Whenever "Lucilla" acts or speaks in these pages, with reference to her blindness, she is doing or saying what persons afflicted as she is have done or said before her. Of the other features which I have added to produce and sustain interest in this central personage of my story, it does not become me to speak. It is for my readers to say if "Lucilla" has found her way to their sympathies. In this character, and more especially again in the characters of "Nugent Dubourg" and "Madame Pratolungo," I have tried to present human nature in its inherent inconsistencies and self-contradictions--in its intricate mixture of good and evil, of great and small--as I see it in the world about me. But the faculty of observing character is so rare, the curiously mistaken tendency to look for logical consistency in human motives and human actions is so general, that I may possibly find the execution of this part of my task misunderstood--sometimes even resented--in certain quarters. However, Time has stood my friend in relation to other characters of mine in other books--and who can say that Time may not help me again here? Perhaps, one of these days, I may be able to make use of some of the many interesting stories of events that have really happened, which have been placed in my hands by persons who could speak as witnesses to the truth of the narrative. Thus far, I have not ventured to disturb the repose of these manuscripts in the locked drawer allotted to them. The true incidents are so "far-fetched"; and the conduct of the real people is so "grossly improbable"!

As for the object which I have had in view in writing this story, it is, I hope, plain enough to speak for itself. I subscribe to the article of belief which declares, that the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction, and that it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness. These are the views which "Poor Miss Finch" is intended to advocate--and this is the impression which I hope to leave on the mind of the reader when the book is closed.

W. C.

January 16th, 1872.

NOTE TO THE PRESENT EDITION.

IN expressing my acknowledgments for the favorable reception accorded to the previous editions of this story, I may take the present opportunity of adverting to one of the characters, not alluded to in the Letter of Dedication. The German oculist--"Herr Grosse"--has impressed himself so strongly as a real personage on the minds of some of my readers afflicted with blindness, or suffering from diseases of the eye, that I have received several written applications requesting me to communicate his present address to patients desirous of consulting him! Sincerely appreciating the testimony thus rendered to the truth of this little study of character, I have been obliged to acknowledge to my correspondents--and I may as well repeat it here--that Herr Grosse has no (individual) living prototype. Like the other Persons of the Drama, in this book and in the books which have preceded it, he is drawn from my general observation of humanity. I have always considered it to be a mistake in Art to limit the delineation of character in fiction to a literary portrait taken from any one "sitter." The result of this process is generally (to my mind) to produce a caricature instead of a character.

November 27th, 1872

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POOR MISS FINCH

CHAPTER THE FIRST

Madame Pratolungo presents Herself

You are here invited to read the story of an Event which occurred in an out-of-the-way corner of England, some years since.

The persons principally concerned in the Event are:--a blind girl; two (twin) brothers; a skilled surgeon; and a curious foreign woman. I am the curious foreign woman. And I take it on myself--for reasons which will presently appear--to tell the story.

So far we understand each other. Good. I may make myself known to you as briefly as I can.

I am Madame Pratolungo--widow of that celebrated South American patriot, Doctor Pratolungo. I am French by birth. Before I married the Doctor, I went through many vicissitudes in my own country. They ended in leaving me (at an age which is of no consequence to anybody) with some experience of the world; with a cultivated musical talent on the pianoforte; and with a comfortable little fortune unexpectedly bequeathed to me by a relative of my dear dead mother (which fortune I shared with good Papa and with my younger sisters). To these qualifications I added another, the most precious of all, when I married the Doctor; namely--a strong infusion of ultra-liberal principles. Vive la République!

Some people do one thing, and some do another, in the way of celebrating the event of their marriage. Having become man and wife, Doctor Pratolungo and I took ship to Central America--and devoted our honey-moon, in those disturbed districts, to the sacred duty of destroying tyrants.

Ah! the vital air of my noble husband was the air of revolutions. From his youth upwards he had followed the glorious profession of Patriot. Wherever the people of the Southern New World rose and declared their independence--and, in my time, that fervent population did nothing else--there was the Doctor self-devoted on the altar of his adopted country. He had been fifteen times exiled, and condemned to death in his absence, when I met with him

in Paris--the picture of heroic poverty, with a brown complexion and one lame leg. Who could avoid falling in love with such a man? I was proud when he proposed to devote me on the altar of his adopted country, as well as himself--me, and my money. For, alas! everything is expensive in this world; including the destruction of tyrants and the saving of Freedom. All my money went in helping the sacred cause of the people. Dictators and filibusters flourished in spite of us. Before we had been a year married, the Doctor had to fly (for the sixteenth time) to escape being tried for his life. My husband condemned to death in his absence; and I with my pockets empty. This is how the Republic rewarded us. And yet, I love the Republic. Ah, you monarchy-people, sitting fat and contented under tyrants, respect that!

This time, we took refuge in England. The affairs of Central America went on without us.

I thought of giving lessons in music. But my glorious husband could not spare me away from him. I suppose we should have starved, and made a sad little paragraph in the English newspapers--if the end had not come in another way. My poor Pratolungo was in truth worn out. He sank under his sixteenth exile. I was left a widow--with nothing but the inheritance of my husband's noble sentiments to console me.

I went back for awhile to good Papa and my sisters in Paris. But it was not in my nature to remain and be a burden on them at home. I returned again to London, with recommendations: and encountered inconceivable disasters in the effort to earn a living honorably. Of all the wealth about me--the prodigal, insolent, ostentatious wealth--none fell to my share. What right has anybody to be rich? I defy you, whoever you may be, to prove that anybody has a right to be rich.

Without dwelling on my disasters, let it be enough to say that I got up one morning, with three pounds, seven shillings, and fourpence in my purse; with my fervid temper, and my republican principles--and with absolutely nothing in prospect, that is to say with not a halfpenny more to come to me, unless I could earn it for myself.

In this sad case, what does an honest woman who is bent on winning her own independence by her own work, do? She takes three and sixpence out of her little humble store; and she advertises herself in a newspaper.

One always advertises the best side of oneself. (Ah, poor humanity!) My best side was my musical side. In the days of my vicissitudes (before my marriage) I had at one time had a share in a millinery establishment in

Lyons. At another time, I had been bedchamber-woman to a great lady in Paris. But in my present situation, these sides of myself were, for various reasons, not so presentable as the pianoforte side. I was not a great player--far from it. But I had been soundly instructed; and I had, what you call, a competent skill on the instrument. Brief, I made the best of myself, I promise you, in my advertisement.

The next day, I borrowed the newspaper, to enjoy the pride of seeing my composition in print.

Ah, heaven! what did I discover? I discovered what other wretched advertising people have found out before me. Above my own advertisement, the very thing I wanted was advertised for by somebody else! Look in any newspaper; and you will see strangers who (if I may so express myself) exactly fit each other, advertising for each other, without knowing it. I had advertised myself as "accomplished musical companion for a lady. With cheerful temper to match." And there above me was my unknown necessitous fellow-creature, crying out in printers' types:--"Wanted, a companion for a lady. Must be an accomplished musician, and have a cheerful temper. Testimonials to capacity, and first-rate references required." Exactly what I had offered! "Apply by letter only, in the first instance." Exactly what I had said! Fie upon me, I had spent three and sixpence for nothing. I threw down the newspaper, in a transport of anger (like a fool)--and then took it up again (like a sensible woman), and applied by letter for the offered place.

My letter brought me into contact with a lawyer. The lawyer enveloped himself in mystery. It seemed to be a professional habit with him to tell nobody anything, if he could possibly help it.

Drop by drop, this wearisome man let the circumstances out. The lady was a young lady. She was the daughter of a clergyman. She lived in a retired part of the country. More even than that, she lived in a retired part of the house. Her father had married a second time. Having only the young lady as child by his first marriage, he had (I suppose by way of a change) a large family by his second marriage. Circumstances rendered it necessary for the young lady to live as much apart as she could from the tumult of a houseful of children. So he went on, until there was no keeping it in any longer--and then he let it out. The young lady was blind!

Young--lonely--blind. I had a sudden inspiration. I felt I should love her.

The question of my musical capacity was, in this sad case, a serious one.

The poor young lady had one great pleasure to illumine her dark life--Music. Her companion was wanted to play from the book, and play worthily, the works of the great masters (whom this young creature adored)--and she, listening, would take her place next at the piano, and reproduce the music morsel by morsel, by ear. A professor was appointed to pronounce sentence on me, and declare if I could be trusted not to misinterpret Mozart, Beethoven, and the other masters who have written for the piano. Through this ordeal I passed with success. As for my references, they spoke for themselves. Not even the lawyer (though he tried hard) could pick holes in them. It was arranged on both sides that I should, in the first instance, go on a month's visit to the young lady. If we both wished it at the end of the time, I was to stay, on terms arranged to my perfect satisfaction. There was our treaty!

The next day I started for my visit by the railway.

My instructions directed me to travel to the town of Lewes in Sussex. Arrived there, I was to ask for the pony-chaise of my young lady's father--described on his card as Reverend Tertius Finch. The chaise was to take me to the rectory-house in the village of Dimchurch. And the village of Dimchurch was situated among the South Down Hills, three or four miles from the coast.

When I stepped into the railway carriage, this was all I knew. After my adventurous life--after the volcanic agitations of my republican career in the Doctor's time--was I about to bury myself in a remote English village, and live a life as monotonous as the life of a sheep on a hill? Ah, with all my experience, I had yet to learn that the narrowest human limits are wide enough to contain the grandest human emotions. I had seen the Drama of Life amid the turmoil of tropical revolutions. I was to see it again, with all its palpitating interest, in the breezy solitudes of the South Down Hills.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

Madame Pratolungo makes a Voyage on Land

A WELL-FED boy, with yellow Saxon hair; a little shabby green chaise; and a rough brown pony--these objects confronted me at the Lewes Station. I said to the boy, "Are you Reverend Finch's servant?" And the boy answered, "I be he."

We drove through the town--a hilly town of desolate clean houses. No living creatures visible behind the jealously-shut windows. No living creatures entering or departing through the sad-colored closed doors. No theater; no place of amusement except an empty town-hall, with a sad policeman meditating on its spruce white steps. No customers in the shops, and nobody to serve them behind the counter, even if they had turned up. Here and there on the pavements, an inhabitant with a capacity for staring, and (apparently) a capacity for nothing else. I said to Reverend Finch's boy, "Is this a rich place?" Reverend Finch's boy brightened and answered, "That it be!" Good. At any rate, they don't enjoy themselves here--the infamous rich!

Leaving this town of unamused citizens immured in domestic tombs, we got on a fine high road--still ascending--with a spacious open country on either side of it.

A spacious open country is a country soon exhausted by a sight-seer's eye. I have learnt from my poor Pratolungo the habit of searching for the political convictions of my fellow-creatures, when I find myself in contact with them in strange places. Having nothing else to do, I searched Finch's boy. His political programme, I found to be:--As much meat and beer as I can contain; and as little work to do for it as possible. In return for this, to touch my hat when I meet the Squire, and to be content with the station to which it has pleased God to call me. Miserable Finch's boy!

We reached the highest point of the road. On our right hand, the ground sloped away gently into a fertile valley--with a village and a church in it; and beyond, an abominable privileged enclosure of grass and trees torn from the community by a tyrant, and called a Park; with the palace in which this enemy of mankind caroused and fattened, standing in the midst. On our left hand, spread the open country--a magnificent prospect of grand grassy hills, rolling away to the horizon; bounded only by the sky. To my surprise, Finch's boy descended; took the pony by the head; and deliberately led him

off the high road, and on to the wilderness of grassy hills, on which not so much as a footpath was discernible anywhere, far or near. The chaise began to heave and roll like a ship on the sea. It became necessary to hold with both hands to keep my place. I thought first of my luggage--then of myself.

"How much is there of this?" I asked.

"Three mile on't," answered Finch's boy.

I insisted on stopping the ship--I mean the chaise--and on getting out. We tied my luggage fast with a rope; and then we went on again, the boy at the pony's head, and I after them on foot.

Ah, what a walk it was! What air over my head; what grass under my feet! The sweetness of the inner land, and the crisp saltness of the distant sea, were mixed in that delicious breeze. The short turf, fragrant with odorous herbs, rose and fell elastic, underfoot. The mountain-piles of white cloud moved in sublime procession along the blue field of heaven, overhead. The wild growth of prickly bushes, spread in great patches over the grass, was in a glory of yellow bloom. On we went; now up, now down; now bending to the right, and now turning to the left. I looked about me. No house; no road; no paths, fences, hedges, walls; no land-marks of any sort. All round us, turn which way we might, nothing was to be seen but the majestic solitude of the hills. No living creatures appeared but the white dots of sheep scattered over the soft green distance, and the skylark singing his hymn of happiness, a speck above my head. Truly a wonderful place! Distant not more than a morning's drive from noisy and populous Brighton--a stranger to this neighborhood could only have found his way by the compass, exactly as if he had been sailing on the sea! The farther we penetrated on our land-voyage, the more wild and the more beautiful the solitary landscape grew. The boy picked his way as he chose--there were no barriers here. Plodding behind, I saw nothing, at one time, but the back of the chaise, tilted up in the air, both boy and pony being invisibly buried in the steep descent of the hill. At other times, the pitch was all the contrary way; the whole interior of the ascending chaise was disclosed to my view, and above the chaise the pony, and above the pony the boy--and, ah, my luggage swaying and rocking in the frail embraces of the rope that held it. Twenty times did I confidently expect to see baggage, chaise, pony, boy, all rolling down into the bottom of a valley together. But no! Not the least little accident happened to spoil my enjoyment of the day. Politically contemptible, Finch's boy had his merit--he was master of his subject as guide and pony-leader among the South Down Hills.

Arrived at the top of (as it seemed to me) our fiftieth grassy summit, I began to look about for signs of the village.

Behind me, rolled back the long undulations of the hills, with the cloud-shadows moving over the solitudes that we had left. Before me, at a break in the purple distance, I saw the soft white line of the sea. Beneath me, at my feet, opened the deepest valley I had noticed yet--with one first sign of the presence of Man scored hideously on the face of Nature, in the shape of a square brown patch of cleared and ploughed land on the grassy slope. I asked if we were getting near the village now. Finch's boy winked, and answered, "Yes, we be."

Astonishing Finch's boy! Ask him what questions I might, the resources of his vocabulary remained invariably the same. Still this youthful Oracle answered always in three monosyllabic words!

We plunged into the valley.

Arrived at the bottom, I discovered another sign of Man. Behold the first road I had seen yet--a rough wagon-road ploughed deep in the chalky soil! We crossed this, and turned a corner of a hill. More signs of human life. Two small boys started up out of a ditch--apparently posted as scouts to give notice of our approach. They yelled, and set off running before us, by some short cut, known only to themselves. We turned again, round another winding of the valley, and crossed a brook. I considered it my duty to make myself acquainted with the local names. What was the brook called? It was called "The Cockshoot"! And the great hill, here, on my right? It was called "The Overblow"! Five minutes more, and we saw our first house--lonely and little--built of mortar and flint from the hills. A name to this also? Certainly. Name of "Browndown." Another ten minutes of walking, involving us more and more deeply in the mysterious green windings of the valley--and the great event of the day happened at last. Finch's boy pointed before him with his whip, and said (even at this supreme moment, still in three monosyllabic words):--

"Here we be!"

So this is Dimchurch! I shake out the chalk-dust from the skirts of my dress. I long (quite vainly) for the least bit of looking-glass to see myself in. Here is the population (to the number of at least five or six), gathered together, informed by the scouts--and it is my woman's business to produce the best impression of myself that I can. We advance along the little road. I smile upon the population. The population stares at me in return. On one

side, I remark three or four cottages, and a bit of open ground; also an inn named "The Cross-Hands," and a bit more of open ground; also a tiny, tiny butcher's shop, with sanguinary insides of sheep on one blue pie-dish in the window, and no other meat than that, and nothing to see beyond, but again the open ground, and again the hills; indicating the end of the village this side. On the other side there appears, for some distance, nothing but a long flint wall guarding the outhouses of a farm. Beyond this, comes another little group of cottages, with the seal of civilization set on them, in the form of a post-office. The post-office deals in general commodities--in boots and bacon, biscuits and flannel, crinoline petticoats and religious tracts. Farther on, behold another flint wall, a garden, and a private dwelling-house; proclaiming itself as the rectory. Farther yet, on rising ground, a little desolate church, with a tiny white circular steeple, topped by an extinguisher in red tiles. Beyond this, the hills and the heavens once more. And there is Dimchurch!

As for the inhabitants--what am I to say? I suppose I must tell the truth.

I remarked one born gentleman among the inhabitants, and he was a sheep-dog. He alone did the honors of the place. He had a stump of a tail, which he wagged at me with extreme difficulty, and a good honest white and black face which he poked companionably into my hand. "Welcome, Madame Pratolungo, to Dimchurch; and excuse these male and female laborers who stand and stare at you. The good God who makes us all has made them too, but has not succeeded so well as with you and me." I happen to be one of the few people who can read dogs' language as written in dogs' faces. I correctly report the language of the gentleman sheep-dog on this occasion.

We opened the gate of the rectory, and passed in. So my Land-Voyage over the South Down Hills came prosperously to its end.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

Poor Miss Finch

THE rectory resembled, in one respect, this narrative that I am now writing. It was in Two Parts. Part the First, in front, composed of the everlasting flint and mortar of the neighborhood, failed to interest me. Part the Second, running back at a right angle, asserted itself as ancient. It had been, in its time, as I afterwards heard, a convent of nuns. Here were snug little Gothic windows, and dark ivy-covered walls of venerable stone: repaired in places, at some past period, with quaint red bricks. I had hoped that I should enter the house by this side of it. But no. The boy--after appearing to be at a loss what to do with me--led the way to a door on the modern side of the building, and rang the bell.

A slovenly young maid-servant admitted me to the house.

Possibly, this person was new to the duty of receiving visitors. Possibly, she was bewildered by a sudden invasion of children in dirty frocks, darting out on us in the hall, and then darting away again into invisible back regions, screeching at the sight of a stranger. At any rate, she too appeared to be at a loss what to do with me. After staring hard at my foreign face, she suddenly opened a door in the wall of the passage, and admitted me into a small room. Two more children in dirty frocks darted, screaming, out of the asylum thus offered to me. I mentioned my name, as soon as I could make myself heard. The maid appeared to be terrified at the length of it. I gave her my card. The maid took it between a dirty finger and thumb--looked at it as if it was some extraordinary natural curiosity--turned it round, exhibiting correct black impressions in various parts of it of her finger and thumb--gave up understanding it in despair, and left the room. She was stopped outside (as I gathered from the sounds) by a returning invasion of children in the hall. There was whispering; there was giggling; there was, every now and then, a loud thump on the door. Prompted by the children, as I suppose--pushed in by them, certainly--the maid suddenly reappeared with a jerk, "Oh, if you please, come this way," she said. The invasion of children retreated again up the stairs--one of them in possession of my card, and waving it in triumph on the first landing. We penetrated to the other end of the passage. Again, a door was opened. Unannounced, I entered another, and a larger room. What did I see?

Fortune had favored me at last. My lucky star had led me to the mistress of

the house.

I made my best curtsey, and found myself confronting a large, light-haired, languid, lymphatic lady--who had evidently been amusing herself by walking up and down the room, at the moment when I appeared. If there can be such a thing as a damp woman--this was one. There was a humid shine on her colorless white face, and an overflow of water in her pale blue eyes. Her hair was not dressed; and her lace cap was all on one side. The upper part of her was clothed in a loose jacket of blue merino; the lower part was robed in a dimity dressing gown of doubtful white. In one hand, she held a dirty dogs'-eared book, which I at once detected to be a Circulating Library novel. Her other hand supported a baby enveloped in flannel, sucking at her breast. Such was my first experience of Reverend Finch's Wife--destined to be also the experience of all aftertime. Never completely dressed; never completely dry; always with a baby in one hand and a novel in the other--such was Finch's wife.

"Oh! Madame Pratolungo? Yes. I hope somebody has told Miss Finch you are here. She has her own establishment, and manages everything herself. Have you had a pleasant journey?" (These words were spoken vacantly, as if her mind was occupied with something else. My first impression of her suggested that she was a weak, good-natured woman, and that she must have originally occupied a station in the humbler ranks of life.)

"Thank you, Mrs. Finch," I said. "I have enjoyed most heartily my journey among your beautiful hills."

"Oh! you like the hills? Excuse my dress. I was half an hour late this morning. When you lose half an hour in this house, you never can pick it up again, try how you may." (I soon discovered that Mrs. Finch was always losing half an hour out of her day, and that she never, by any chance, succeeded in ending it again, as she had just told me.)

"I understand, madam. The cares of a numerous family--"

"Ah! that's just where it is." (This was a favorite phrase with Mrs. Finch). "There's Finch, he gets up in the morning and goes and works in the garden. Then there's the washing of the children; and the dreadful waste that goes on in the kitchen. And Finch, he comes in without any notice, and wants his breakfast. And of course I can't leave the baby. And half an hour does slip away so easily, that how to overtake it again, I do assure you I really don't know." Here the baby began to exhibit symptoms of having taken more maternal nourishment than his infant stomach could comfortably contain. I

held the novel, while Mrs. Finch searched for her handkerchief--first in her bedgown pocket; secondly, here, there, and everywhere in the room.

At this interesting moment there was a knock at the door. An elderly woman appeared--who offered a most refreshing contrast to the members of the household with whom I had made acquaintance thus far. She was neatly dressed, and she saluted me with the polite composure of a civilized being.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. My young lady has only this moment heard of your arrival. Will you be so kind as to follow me?"

I turned to Mrs. Finch. She had found her handkerchief, and had put her overflowing baby to rights again. I respectfully handed back the novel. "Thank you," said Mrs. Finch. "I find novels compose my mind. Do you read novels too? Remind me--and I'll lend you this one to-morrow." I expressed my acknowledgments, and withdrew. At the door, I look round, saluting the lady of the house. Mrs. Finch was promenading the room, with the baby in one hand and the novel in the other, and the dimity bedgown trailing behind her.

We ascended the stairs, and entered a bare white-washed passage, with drab-colored doors in it, leading, as I presumed, into the sleeping chambers of the house.

Every door opened as we passed; children peeped out at me, screamed at me, and banged the door to again. "What family has the present Mrs. Finch?" I asked. The decent elderly woman was obliged to stop, and consider. "Including the baby, ma'am, and two sets of twins, and one seven months' child of deficient intellect--fourteen in all." Hearing this, I began--though I consider priests, kings, and capitalists to be the enemies of the human race--to feel a certain exceptional interest in Reverend Finch. Did he never wish that he had been a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, mercifully forbidden to marry at all? While the question passed through my mind, my guide took out a key, and opened a heavy oaken door at the further end of the passage.

"We are obliged to keep the door locked, ma'am," she explained, "or the children would be in and out of our part of the house all day long."

After my experience of the children, I own I looked at the oaken door with mingled sentiments of gratitude and respect.

We turned a corner, and found ourselves in the vaulted corridor of the

ancient portion of the house.

The casement windows, on one side--sunk deep in recesses--looked into the garden. Each recess was filled with groups of flowers in pots. On the other side, the old wall was gaily decorated with hangings of bright chintz. The doors were colored of a creamy white, with gilt moldings. The brightly ornamented matting under our feet I at once recognized as of South American origin. The ceiling above was decorated in delicate pale blue, with borderings of flowers. Nowhere down the whole extent of the place was so much as a single morsel of dark color to be seen anywhere.

At the lower end of the corridor, a solitary figure in a pure white robe was bending over the flowers in the window. This was the blind girl whose dark hours I had come to cheer. In the scattered villages of the South Downs, the simple people added their word of pity to her name, and called her compassionately--"Poor Miss Finch." As for me, I can only think of her by her pretty Christian name. She is "Lucilla" when my memory dwells on her. Let me call her "Lucilla" here.

When my eyes first rested on her, she was picking off the dead leaves from her flowers. Her delicate ear detected the sound of my strange footstep, long before I reached the place at which she was standing. She lifted her head--and advanced quickly to meet me with a faint flush on her face, which came and died away again in a moment. I happen to have visited the picture gallery at Dresden in former years. As she approached me, nearer and nearer, I was irresistibly reminded of the gem of that superb collection--the matchless Virgin of Raphael, called "The Madonna di San Sisto." The fair broad forehead; the peculiar fullness of the flesh between the eyebrow and the eyelid; the delicate outline of the lower face; the tender, sensitive lips; the color of the complexion and the hair--all reflected, with a startling fidelity, the lovely creature of the Dresden picture. The one fatal point at which the resemblance ceased, was in the eyes. The divinely-beautiful eyes of Raphael's Virgin were lost in the living likeness of her that confronted me now. There was no deformity; there was nothing to recoil from, in my blind Lucilla. The poor, dim, sightless eyes had a faded, changeless, inexpressive look--and that was all. Above them, below them, round them, to the very edges of her eyelids, there was beauty, movement, life. In them--death! A more charming creature--with that one sad drawback--I never saw. There was no other personal defect in her. She had the fine height, the well-balanced figure, and the length of the lower limbs, which make all a woman's movements graceful of themselves. Her voice was delicious--clear, cheerful, sympathetic. This, and her smile--which added a charm of its own to the beauty of her mouth--won my heart, before she had got close enough

to me to put her hand in mine. "Ah, my dear!" I said, in my headlong way, "I am so glad to see you!" The instant the words passed my lips, I could have cut my tongue out for reminding her in that brutal manner that she was blind.

To my relief, she showed no sign of feeling it as I did. "May I see you, in my way?" she asked gently--and held up her pretty white hand. "May I touch your face?"

I sat down at once on the window-seat. The soft rosy tips of her fingers seemed to cover my whole face in an instant. Three separate times she passed her hand rapidly over me; her own face absorbed all the while in breathless attention to what she was about. "Speak again!" she said suddenly, holding her hand over me in suspense. I said a few words. She stopped me by a kiss. "No more!" she exclaimed joyously. "Your voice says to my ears, what your face says to my fingers. I know I shall like you. Come in, and see the rooms we are going to live in together."

As I rose, she put her arm round my waist--then instantly drew it away again, and shook her fingers impatiently, as if something had hurt them.

"A pin?" I asked.

"No! no! What colored dress have you got on?"

"Purple."

"Ah! I knew it! Pray don't wear dark colors. I have my own blind horror of anything that is dark. Dear Madame Pratolungo, wear pretty bright colors, to please me!" She put her arm caressingly round me again--round my neck, however, this time, where her hand could rest on my linen collar. "You will change your dress before dinner--won't you?" she whispered. "Let me unpack for you, and choose which dress I like."

The brilliant decorations of the corridor were explained to me now!

We entered the rooms; her bed-room, my bed-room, and our sitting-room between the two. I was prepared to find them, what they proved to be--as bright as looking-glasses, and gilding, and gaily-colored ornaments, and cheerful knick-knacks of all sorts could make them. They were more like rooms in my lively native country than rooms in sober colorless England. The one thing which I own did still astonish me, was that all this sparkling beauty of adornment in Lucilla's habitation should have been provided for

the express gratification of a young lady who could not see. Experience was yet to show me that the blind can live in their imaginations, and have their favorite fancies and illusions like the rest of us.

To satisfy Lucilla by changing my dark purple dress, it was necessary that I should first have my boxes. So far as I knew, Finch's boy had taken my luggage, along with the pony, to the stables. Before Lucilla could ring the bell to make inquiries, my elderly guide (who had silently left us while we were talking together in the corridor) re-appeared, followed by the boy and a groom, carrying my things. These servants also brought with them certain parcels for their young mistress, purchased in the town, together with a bottle, wrapped in fair white paper, which looked like a bottle of medicine--and which had a part of its own to play in our proceedings, later in the day.

"This is my old nurse," said Lucilla, presenting her attendant to me. "Zillah can do a little of everything--cooking included. She has had lessons at a London Club. You must like Zillah, Madame Pratolungo, for my sake. Are your boxes open?"

She went down on her knees before the boxes, as she asked the question. No girl with the full use of her eyes could have enjoyed more thoroughly than she did the trivial amusement of unpacking my clothes. This time, however, her wonderful delicacy of touch proved to be at fault. Of two dresses of mine which happened to be exactly the same in texture, though widely different in color, she picked out the dark dress as being the light one. I saw that I disappointed her sadly when I told her of her mistake. The next guess she made, however, restored the tips of her fingers to their place in her estimation: she discovered the stripes in a smart pair of stockings of mine, and brightened up directly. "Don't be long dressing," she said, on leaving me. "We shall have dinner in half an hour. French dishes, in honor of your arrival. I like a nice dinner--I am what you call in your country, gourmande. See the sad consequence!" She put one finger to her pretty chin. "I am getting fat! I am threatened with a double chin--at two and twenty. Shocking! shocking!"

So she left me. And such was the first impression produced on my mind by "Poor Miss Finch."