

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

A Cage of Finches

LARGE families are--as my experience goes--of two sorts. We have the families whose members all admire each other. And we have the families whose members all detest each other. For myself, I prefer the second sort. Their quarrels are their own affair; and they have a merit which the first sort are never known to possess--the merit of being sometimes able to see the good qualities of persons who do not possess the advantage of being related to them by blood. The families whose members all admire each other, are families saturated with insufferable conceit. You happen to speak of Shakespeare, among these people, as a type of supreme intellectual capacity. A female member of the family will not fail to convey to you that you would have illustrated your meaning far more completely if you had referred her to "dear Papa." You are out walking with a male member of the household; and you say of a woman who passes, "What a charming creature!" Your companion smiles at your simplicity, and wonders whether you have ever seen his sister when she is dressed for a ball. These are the families who cannot be separated without corresponding with each other every day. They read you extracts from their letters, and say, "Where is the writer by profession who can equal this?" They talk of their private affairs, in your presence--and appear to think that you ought to be interested too. They enjoy their own jokes across you at table--and wonder how it is that you are not amused. In domestic circles of this sort the sisters sit habitually on the brothers' knees; and the husbands inquire into the wives' ailments, in public, as unconcernedly as if they were closeted in their own room. When we arrive at a more advanced stage of civilization, the State will supply cages for these intolerable people; and notices will be posted at the corners of streets, "Beware of Number Twelve: a family in a state of mutual admiration is hung up there!"

I gathered from Lucilla that the Finches were of the second order of large families, as mentioned above. Hardly one of the members of this domestic group was on speaking terms with the other. And some of them had been separated for years, without once troubling Her Majesty's Post Office to convey even the slightest expression of sentiment from one to the other.

The first wife of Reverend Finch was a Miss Batchford. The members of her family (limited at the time of the marriage to her brother and her sister) strongly disapproved of her choice of a husband. The rank of a Finch (I

laugh at these contemptible distinctions!) was decided, in this case, to be not equal to the rank of a Batchford. Nevertheless, Miss married. Her brother and sister declined to be present at the ceremony. First quarrel.

Lucilla was born. Reverend Finch's elder brother (on speaking terms with no other member of the family) interfered with a Christian proposal--namely--to shake hands across the baby's cradle. Adopted by the magnanimous Batchfords. First reconciliation.

Time passed. Reverend Finch--then officiating in a poor curacy near a great manufacturing town--felt a want (the want of money); and took a liberty (the liberty of attempting to borrow of his brother-in-law). Mr. Batchford, being a rich man, regarded this overture, it is needless to say, in the light of an insult. Miss Batchford sided with her brother. Second quarrel.

Time passed, as before. Mrs. Finch the first died. Reverend Finch's elder brother (still at daggers drawn with the other members of the family) made a second Christian proposal--namely--to shake hands across the wife's grave. Adopted once more by the bereaved Batchfords. Second reconciliation.

Another lapse of time. Reverend Finch, left a widower with one daughter, became personally acquainted with an inhabitant of the great city near which he ministered, who was also a widower with one daughter. The status of the parent, in this case--social-political-religious--was Shoemaker-Radical-Baptist. Reverend Finch, still wanting money, swallowed it all; and married the daughter, with a dowry of three thousand pounds. This proceeding alienated from him for ever, not the Batchfords only, but the peacemaking elder brother as well. That excellent Christian ceased to be on speaking terms now with his brother the clergyman, as well as with all the rest of the family. The complete isolation of Reverend Finch followed. Regularly every year did the second Mrs. Finch afford opportunities of shaking hands, not only over one cradle, but sometimes over two. Vain and meritorious fertility! Nothing came of it, but a kind of compromise. Lucilla, quite overlooked among the rector's rapidly-increasing second family, was allowed to visit her maternal uncle and aunt at stated periods in every year. Born, to all appearance with the full possession of her sight, the poor child had become incurably blind before she was a year old. In all other respects, she presented a striking resemblance to her mother. Bachelor uncle Batchford, and his old maiden sister, both conceived the strongest affection for the child. "Our niece Lucilla," they said, "has justified our fondest hopes--she is a Batchford, not a Finch!" Lucilla's father (promoted, by this time, to the rectory of Dimchurch) let them talk. "Wait a bit, and money will come of it," was all he said. Truly money was wanted!--with fruitful Mrs. Finch

multiplying cradles, year after year, till the doctor himself (employed on contract) got tired of it, and said one day, "It is not true that there is an end to everything: there is no end to the multiplying capacity of Mrs. Finch."

Lucilla grew up from childhood to womanhood. She was twenty years old, before her father's expectations were realized, and the money came of it at last.

Uncle Batchford died a single man. He divided his fortune between his maiden sister, and his niece. When she came of age, Lucilla was to have an income of fifteen hundred pounds a year--on certain conditions, which the will set forth at great length. The effect of these conditions was (first) to render it absolutely impossible for Reverend Finch, under any circumstances whatever, to legally inherit a single farthing of the money--and (secondly), to detach Lucilla from her father's household, and to place her under the care of her maiden aunt, so long as she remained unmarried, for a period of three months in every year.

The will avowed the object of this last condition in the plainest words. "I die as I have lived" (wrote uncle Batchford), "a High Churchman and a Tory. My legacy to my niece shall only take effect on these terms--namely--that she shall be removed at certain stated periods from the Dissenting and Radical influences to which she is subjected under her father's roof, and shall be placed under the care of an English gentlewoman who unites to the advantages of birth and breeding the possession of high and honorable principles"--etcetera, etcetera. Can you conceive Reverend Finch's feelings, sitting, with his daughter by his side, among the company, while the will was read, and hearing this? He got up, like a true Englishman, and made them a speech. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I admit that I am a Liberal in politics, and that my wife's family are Dissenters. As an example of the principles thus engendered in my household, I beg to inform you that my daughter accepts this legacy with my full permission, and that I forgive Mr. Batchford." With that, he walked out, with his daughter on his arm. He had heard enough, please to observe, to satisfy him that Lucilla (while she lived unmarried) could do what she liked with her income. Before they had got back to Dimchurch, Reverend Finch had completed a domestic arrangement which permitted his daughter to occupy a perfectly independent position in the rectory, and which placed in her father's pockets--as Miss Finch's contribution to the housekeeping--five hundred a year.

(Do you know what I felt when I heard this? I felt the deepest regret that Finch of the liberal principles had not made a third with my poor Pralongo and me in Central America. With him to advise us, we should have saved

the sacred cause of Freedom without spending a single farthing on it!)

The old side of the rectory, hitherto uninhabited, was put in order and furnished--of course at Lucilla's expense. On her twenty-first birthday, the repairs were completed; the first installment of the housekeeping money was paid; and the daughter was established, as an independent lodger, in her own father's house!

In order to thoroughly appreciate Finch's ingenuity, it is necessary to add here that Lucilla had shown, as she grew up, an increasing dislike of living at home. In her blind state, the endless turmoil of the children distracted her. She and her step-mother did not possess a single sympathy in common. Her relations with her father were in much the same condition. She could compassionate his poverty, and she could treat him with the forbearance and respect due to him from his child. As to really venerating and loving him--the less said about that the better. Her happiest days had been the days she spent with her uncle and aunt; her visits to the Batchfords had grown to be longer and longer visits with every succeeding year. If the father, in appealing to the daughter's sympathies, had not dexterously contrived to unite the preservation of her independence with the continuance of her residence under his roof, she would, on coming of age, either have lived altogether with her aunt, or have set up an establishment of her own. As it was, the rector had secured his five hundred a year, on terms acceptable to both sides--and, more than that, he had got her safe under his own eye. For, remark, there was one terrible possibility threatening him in the future--the possibility of Lucilla's marriage!

Such was the strange domestic position of this interesting creature, at the time when I entered the house.

You will now understand how completely puzzled I was when I recalled what had happened on the evening of my arrival, and when I asked myself--in the matter of the mysterious stranger--what course I was to take next. I had found Lucilla a solitary being--helplessly dependent in her blindness on others--and, in that sad condition, without a mother, without a sister, without a friend even in whose sympathies she could take refuge, in whose advice she could trust. I had produced a first favorable impression on her; I had won her liking at once, as she had won mine. I had accompanied her on an evening walk, innocent of all suspicion of what was going on in her mind. I had by pure accident enabled a stranger to intensify the imaginary interest which she felt in him, by provoking him to speak in her hearing for the first time. In a moment of hysterical agitation--and in sheer despair of knowing who else to confide in--the poor, foolish, blind, lonely girl had opened her

heart to me. What was I to do?

If the case had been an ordinary one, the whole affair would have been simply ridiculous.

But the case of Lucilla was not the case of girls in general.

The minds of the blind are, by cruel necessity, forced inward on themselves. They live apart from us--ah, how hopelessly far apart!--in their own dark sphere, of which we know nothing. What relief could come to Lucilla from the world outside? None! It was part of her desolate liberty to be free to dwell unremittingly on the ideal creature of her own dream. Within the narrow limit of the one impression that it had been possible for her to derive of this man--the impression of the beauty of his voice--her fancy was left to work unrestrained in the changeless darkness of her life. What a picture! I shudder as I draw it. Oh, yes, it is easy, I know, to look at it the other way--to laugh at the folly of a girl, who first excites her imagination about a total stranger; and then, when she hears him speak, falls in love with his voice! But add that the girl is blind; that the girl lives habitually in the world of her own imagination; that the girl has nobody at home who can exercise a wholesome influence over her. Is there nothing pitiable in such a state of things as this? For myself, though I come of a light-hearted nation that laughs at everything--I saw my own face looking horribly grave and old, as I sat before the glass that night, brushing my hair.

I looked at my bed. Bah! what was the use of going to bed? She was her own mistress. She was perfectly free to take her next walk to Browndown alone! and to place herself, for all I knew to the contrary, at the mercy of a dishonorable and designing man. What was I? Only her companion. I had no right to interfere--and yet, if anything happened, I should be blamed. It is so easy to say, "You ought to have done something." Whom could I consult? The worthy old nurse only held the position of servant. Could I address myself to the lymphatic lady with the baby in one hand, and the novel in the other? Absurd! her stepmother was not to be thought of. Her father? Judging by hearsay, I had not derived a favorable impression of the capacity of Reverend Finch for interfering successfully in a matter of this sort. However, he was her father; and I could feel my way cautiously with him at first. Hearing Zillah moving about the corridor, I went out to her. In the course of a little gossip, I introduced the name of the master of the house. How was it I had not seen him yet? For an excellent reason. He had gone to visit a friend at Brighton. It was then Tuesday. He was expected back on "sermon-day"--that is to say on Saturday in the same week.

I returned to my room, a little out of temper. In this state my mind works with wonderful freedom. I had another of my inspirations. Mr. Dubourg had taken the liberty of speaking to me that evening. Good. I determined to go alone to Browndown the next morning, and take the liberty of speaking to Mr. Dubourg.

Was this resolution solely inspired by my interest in Lucilla? Or had my own curiosity been all the time working under the surface, and influencing the course of my reflections unknown to myself? I went to bed without inquiring. I recommend you to go to bed without inquiring too.