

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD

He sets us All Right

I HAVE thus far quite inadvertently omitted to mention one of the prominent virtues of Reverend Finch. He was an accomplished master of that particular form of human persecution which is called reading aloud; and he inflicted his accomplishment on his family circle at every available opportunity. Of what we suffered on these occasions, I shall say nothing. Let it be enough to mention that the rector thoroughly enjoyed the pleasure of hearing his own magnificent voice.

There was no escaping Mr. Finch when the rage for "reading" seized on him. Now on one pretense, and now on another, he descended on us unfortunate women, book in hand; seated us at one end of the room; placed himself at the other; opened his dreadful mouth; and fired words at us, like shots at a target, by the hour together. Sometimes he gave us poetical readings from Shakespeare or Milton; and sometimes Parliamentary speeches by Burke or Sheridan. Read what he might, he made such a noise and such a fuss over it; he put his own individuality so prominently in the foremost place, and he kept the poets or the orators whom he was supposed to be interpreting so far in the back ground, that they lost every trace of character of their own, and became one and all perfectly intolerable reflections of Mr. Finch. I date my first unhappy doubts of the supreme excellence of Shakespeare's poetry from the rector's readings; and I attribute to the same exasperating cause my implacable hostility (on every question of the time) to the policy of Mr. Burke. On the evening when Nugent Dubourg was expected at Browndown--and when we particularly wanted to be left alone to dress ourselves, and to gossip by anticipation about the expected visitor--Mr. Finch was seized with one of his periodical rages for firing off words at his family, after tea. He selected Hamlet as the medium for exhibiting his voice, on this occasion; and he declared, as the principal motive for taking his elocutionary exercise, that the object he especially had in view was the benefit of poor Me!

"My good creature, I accidentally heard you reading to Lucilla, the other day. It was very nice, as far as it went--very nice indeed. But you will allow me--as a person, Madame Pratolungo, possessing considerable practice in the art of reading aloud--to observe that you might be benefited by a hint or two. I will give you a few ideas. (Mrs. Finch! I propose giving Madame Pratolungo a few ideas.) Pay particular attention, if you please, to the Pauses, and to the management of the Voice at the end of the lines. Lucilla, my child, you are

interested in this. The perfecting of Madame Pratolungo is a matter of considerable importance to you. Don't go away."

Lucilla and I happened, on that evening, to be guests at the rectory table. It was one of the regular occasions on which we left our own side of the house, and joined the family at (what Mr. Finch called) "the pastor's evening meal." He had got his wife; he had got his eldest daughter; he had got your humble servant. A horrid smile of enjoyment overspread the reverend gentleman's face, as he surveyed us from the opposite end of the room, and opened his vocal fire on his audience of three.

"Hamlet: Act the First; Scene the First. Elsinore. A Platform before the Castle. Francisco on his post" (Mr. Finch). "Enter to him Bernardo" (Mr. Finch). "Who's there?" "Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself." (Mrs. Finch unfolds herself--she suckles the baby, and tries to look as if she was having an intellectual treat.) "Francisco and Bernardo converse in bass-- Boom-boom-boom. Enter Horatio and Marcellus" (Mr. Finch and Mr. Finch.) "Stand! Who's there?" "Friends to this ground." "And liegemen to the Dane." (Madame Pratolungo begins to feel the elocutionary exposition of Shakespeare, where she always feels it, in her legs. She tries to sit still on her chair. Useless! She is suffering under the malady known to her by bitter experience of Mr. Finch, as the Hamlet-Fidgets.) Bernardo and Francisco, Horatio and Marcellus, converse--Boom-boom-boom. "Enter Ghost of Hamlet's Father." Mr. Finch makes an awful pause. In the supernatural silence, we can hear the baby sucking. Mrs. Finch enjoys her intellectual treat. Madame Pratolungo fidgets. Lucilla catches the infection, and fidgets too. Marcellus-Finch goes on. "Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio." Bernardo-Finch backs him: "Looks it not like the King? Mark it, Horatio." Lucilla-Finch inserts herself in the dialogue: "Papa, I am very sorry; I have had a nervous headache all day; please excuse me if I take a turn in the garden." The rector makes another awful pause, and glares at his daughter. (Exit Lucilla.) Horatio looks at the Ghost, and takes up the dialogue: "Most like; it harrows me "--Boom-boom-boom. The baby is satiated. Mrs. Finch wants her handkerchief. Madame Pratolungo seizes the opportunity of moving her distracted legs, and finds the handkerchief. Mr. Finch pauses--glares---goes on again--reaches the second scene. "Enter the King, Queen, Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes, Voltimand, Cornelius, and Lords Attendant." All Mr. Finch! oh, my legs! my legs! all Mr. Finch, and Boom-boom-boom. Third scene. "Enter Laertes and Ophelia." (Both Rectors of Dimchurch; both with deep bass voices; both about five feet high, pitted with the small-pox, and adorned round the neck with dingy white cravats.) Mr. Finch goes on and on and on. Mrs. Finch and the baby simultaneously close their eyes in slumber. Madame Pratolungo suffers such tortures of restlessness in her lower limbs,

that she longs for a skilled surgeon to take out his knife and deliver her from her own legs. Mr. Finch advances in deeper and deeper bass, in keener and keener enjoyment, to the Fourth Scene. ("Enter Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus.") Mercy! what do I hear? Is relief approaching to us from the world outside? Are there footsteps in the hall? Yes! Mrs. Finch opens her eyes; Mrs. Finch hears the footsteps, and rejoices in them as I do. Reverend Hamlet hears nothing but his own voice. He begins the scene: "The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold." The door opens. The rector feels a gust of air, dramatically appropriate, just at the right moment. He looks round. If it is a servant, let that domestic person tremble! No--not a servant. Guests--heavens be praised, guests. Welcome, gentlemen--welcome! No more Hamlet, tonight, thanks to You. Enter two Characters who must be instantly attended to:--Mr. Oscar Dubourg; introducing his twin-brother from America, Mr. Nugent Dubourg.

Astonishment at the extraordinary resemblance between them, was the one impression felt by all three of us, as the brothers entered the room.

Exactly alike in their height, in their walk, in their features, and in their voices. Both with the same colored hair and the same beardless faces. Oscar's smile exactly reflected on Nugent's lips. Oscar's odd little semi-foreign tricks of gesticulation with his hands, exactly reproduced in the hands of Nugent. And, to crown it all, there was the complexion which Oscar had lost for ever (just a shade darker perhaps) found again on Nugent's cheeks! The one difference which made it possible to distinguish between them, at the moment when they first appeared together in the room, was also the one difference which Lucilla was physically incapable of detecting--the terrible contrast of color between the brother who bore the blue disfigurement of the drug, and the brother who was left as Nature had made him.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Finch--I have long wished for this pleasure. Thank you, Mr. Finch, for all your kindness to my brother. Madame Pratolungo, I presume? Permit me to shake hands. It is needless to say, I have heard of your illustrious husband. Aha! here's a baby. Yours, Mrs. Finch? Girl or boy, ma'am? A fine child--if a bachelor may be allowed to pronounce an opinion. Tweet--tweet--tweet!"

He chirruped to the baby, as if he had been a family man, and snapped his fingers gaily. Poor Oscar's blue face turned in silent triumph towards me. "What did I tell you?" his look asked. "Did I not say Nugent fascinated

everybody at first sight?" Most true. An irresistible man. So utterly different in his manner from Oscar--except when he was in repose--and yet so like Oscar in other respects, I can only describe him as his brother completed. He had the pleasant lively flow of spirits, the easy winning gentleman-like confidence in himself, which Oscar wanted. And, then, what excellent taste he possessed. He liked children! he respected the memory of my glorious Pratolungo!--In half a minute from the time when he entered the room, Nugent Dubourg had won Mrs. Finch's heart and mine.

He turned from the baby to Mr. Finch, and pointed to the open Shakespeare on the table.

"You were reading to the ladies?" he said. "I am afraid we have interrupted you."

"Don't mention it," said the rector, with his lofty politeness. "Another time will do. It is a habit of mine, Mr. Nugent, to read aloud in my family circle. As a clergyman and a lover of poetry (in both capacities) I have long cultivated the art of elocution----"

"My dear sir, excuse me, you have cultivated it all wrong!"

Mr. Finch paused, thunderstruck. A man in his presence presuming to have an opinion of his own! a man in the rectory parlor capable of interrupting the rector in the middle of a sentence! guilty of the insane audacity of telling him, as a reader--with Shakespeare open before them--that he read wrong!

"Oh, we heard you as we came in!" proceeded Nugent, with the most undiminished confidence, expressed in the most gentlemanlike manner. "You read it like this." He took up Hamlet and read the opening line of the Fourth Scene, ("The air bites shrewdly. It is very cold") with an irresistibly-accurate imitation of Mr. Finch. "That's nor the way Hamlet would speak. No man in his position would remark that it was very cold in that bow-wow manner. What is Shakespeare before all things? True to nature; always true to nature. What condition is Hamlet in when he is expecting to see the Ghost? He is nervous, and he feels the cold. Let him show it naturally; let him speak as any other man would speak, under the circumstances. Look here! Quick and quiet--like this. 'The air bites shrewdly'--there Hamlet stops and shivers--pur-rer-rer! 'it is very cold.' That's the way to read Shakespeare!"

Mr. Finch lifted his head into the air as high as it could possibly go, and brought the flat of his hand down with a solemn and sounding smack on the

open book.

"Allow me to say, sir----!" he began.

Nugent stopped him again, more good-humouredly than ever.

"You don't agree with me? All right! Quite useless to dispute about it. I don't know what you may be--I am the most opinionated man in existence. Sheer waste of time, my dear sir, to attempt convincing Me. Now, just look at that child!" Here Mr. Nugent Dubourg's attention was suddenly attracted by the baby. He twisted round on his heel, and addressed Mrs. Finch. "I take the liberty of saying, ma'am, that a more senseless dress doesn't exist, than the dress that is put, in this country, on infants of tender years. What are the three main functions which that child--that charming child of yours--performs? He sucks; he sleeps; and he grows. At the present moment, he isn't sucking, he isn't sleeping--he is growing with all his might. Under those interesting circumstances, what does he want to do? To move his limbs freely in every direction. You let him swing his arms to his heart's content--and you deny him freedom to kick his legs. You clothe him in a dress three times as long as himself. He tries to throw his legs up in the air as he throws his arms, and he can't do it. There is his senseless long dress entangling itself in his toes, and making an effort of what Nature intended to be a luxury. Can anything be more absurd? What are mothers about? Why don't they think for themselves? Take my advice--short petticoats, Mrs. Finch. Liberty, glorious liberty, for my young friend's legs! Room, heaps of room, for that infant martyr's toes!"

Mrs. Finch listened helplessly--lifted the baby's long petticoats, and looked at them--stared piteously at Nugent Dubourg--opened her lips to speak--and, thinking better of it, turned her watery eyes on her husband, appealing to him to take the matter up. Mr. Finch made another attempt to assert his dignity--a ponderously satirical attempt, this time.

"In offering your advice to my wife, Mr. Nugent," said the rector, "you must permit me to remark that it would have had more practical force if it had been the advice of a married man. I beg to remind you----"

"You beg to remind me that it is the advice of a bachelor? Oh, come! that really won't do at this time of day. Doctor Johnson settled that argument at once and for ever, a century since. 'Sir!' (he said to somebody of your way of thinking) 'you may scold your carpenter, when he has made a bad table, though you can't make a table yourself.' I say to you--'Mr. Finch, you may point out a defect in a baby's petticoats, though you haven't got a baby

yourself! Doesn't that satisfy you? All right! Take another illustration. Look at your room here. I can see in the twinkling of an eye, that it's badly lit. You have only got one window--you ought to have two. Is it necessary to be a practical builder to discover that? Absurd! Are you satisfied now? No! Take another illustration. What's this printed paper, here, on the chimney-piece? Assessed Taxes. Ha! Assessed Taxes will do. You're not in the House of Commons; you're not Chancellor of the Exchequer--but haven't you an opinion of your own about taxation, in spite of that? Must you and I be in Parliament before we can presume to see that the feeble old British Constitution is at its last gasp----?"

"And the vigorous young Republic drawing its first breath of life!" I burst in; introducing the Pratolungo programme (as my way is) at every available opportunity.

Nugent Dubourg instantly wheeled round in my direction; and set me right on my subject, just as he had set the rector right on reading Hamlet, and Mrs. Finch right on clothing babies.

"Not a bit of it!" he pronounced positively. "The 'young Republic' is the rickety child of the political family. Give him up, ma'am. You will never make a man of him."

I tried to assert myself as the rector had tried before me--with precisely the same result. I appealed indignantly to the authority of my illustrious husband.

"Doctor Pratolungo--" I began.

"Was an honest man," interposed Nugent Dubourg. "I am an advanced Liberal myself--I respect him. But he was quite wrong. All sincere republicans make the same mistake. They believe in the existence of public spirit in Europe. Amiable delusion! Public spirit is dead in Europe. Public spirit is the generous emotion of young nations, of new peoples. In selfish old Europe, private interest has taken its place. When your husband preached the republic, on what ground did he put it? On the ground that the republic was going to elevate the nation. Pooh! Ask me to accept the republic, on the ground that I elevate Myself--and, supposing you can prove it, I will listen to you. If you are ever to set republican institutions going, in the Old World--there is the only motive power that will do it!"

I was indignant at such sentiments. "My glorious husband--" I began again.

"Would have died rather than appeal to the meanest instincts of his fellow-creatures. Just so! There was his mistake. That's why he never could make anything of the republic. That's why the republic is the rickety child of the political family. Quod erat demonstrandum," said Nugent Dubourg, finishing me off with a pleasant smile, and an easy indicative gesture of the hand which said, "Now I have settled these three people in succession, I am equally well satisfied with myself and with them!"

His smile was irresistible. Bent as I was on disputing the degrading conclusions at which he had arrived, I really had not fire enough in me, at the moment, to feed my own indignation. As to Reverend Finch, he sat silently swelling in a corner; digesting, as he best might, the discovery that there was another man in the world, besides the Rector of Dimchurch, with an excellent opinion of himself, and with perfectly unassailable confidence and fluency in expressing it. In the momentary silence that now followed, Oscar got his first opportunity of speaking. He had, thus far, been quite content to admire his clever brother. He now advanced to me, and asked what had become of Lucilla.

"The servant told me she was here," he said. "I am so anxious to introduce her to Nugent."

Nugent put his arm affectionately round his brother's neck, and gave him a hug. "Dear old boy! I am just as anxious as you are."

"Lucilla went out a little while since," I said, "to take a turn in the garden."

"I'll go and find her," said Oscar. "Wait here, Nugent. I'll bring her in."

He left the room. Before he could close the door one of the servants appeared, to claim Mrs. Finch's private ear, on some mysterious domestic emergency. Nugent facetiously entreated her, as she passed him, to clear her mind of prejudice, and consider the question of infant petticoats on its own merits. Mr. Finch took offense at this second reference to the subject. He rose to follow his wife.

"When you are a married man, Mr. Dubourg," said the rector severely, "you will learn to leave the management of an infant in its mother's hands."

"There's another mistake!" remarked Nugent, following him with unabated good humour, to the door. "A married man's idea of another man as a husband, always begins and ends with his idea of himself." He turned to me, as the door closed on Mr. Finch. "Now we are alone, Madame Pratolungo,"

he said, "I want to speak to you about Miss Finch. There is an opportunity, before she comes in. Oscar's letter only told me that she was blind. I am naturally interested in everything that relates to my brother's future wife. I am particularly interested about this affliction of hers. May I ask how long she has been blind?"

"Since she was a year old," I replied.

"Through an accident?"

"No."

"After a fever? or a disease of any other sort?"

I began to feel a little surprised at his entering into these medical details.

"I never heard that it was through a fever, or other illness," I said. "So far as I know, the blindness came on unexpectedly, from some cause that did not express itself to the people about her, at the time."

He drew his chair confidentially nearer to mine. "How old is she?" he asked.

I began to feel more than a little surprised; and I showed it, I suppose, on telling him Lucilla's age.

"As things are now," he explained, "there are reasons which make me hesitate to enter on the question of Miss Finch's blindness either with my brother, or with any members of the family. I must wait to speak about it to them, until I can speak to good practical purpose. There is no harm in my starting the subject with you. When she first lost her sight, no means of restoring it were left untried, of course?"

"I should suppose not," I replied. "It's so long since, I have never asked."

"So long since," he repeated--and then considered for a moment.

His reflections ended in a last question.

"She is resigned, I suppose--and everybody about her is resigned--to the idea of her being hopelessly blind for life."

Instead of answering him, I put a question on my side. My heart was beginning to beat rapidly--without my knowing why.

"Mr. Nugent Dubourg," I said, "what have you got in your mind about Lucilla?"

"Madame Pratolungo," he replied, "I have got something in my mind which was put into it by a friend of mine whom I met in America."

"The friend you mentioned in your letter to your brother?"

"The same."

"The German gentleman whom you propose to introduce to Oscar and Lucilla?"

"Yes."

"May I ask who he is?"

Nugent Dubourg looked at me attentively; considered with himself for the second time; and answered in these words:

"He is the greatest living authority, and the greatest living operator, in diseases of the eye."

The idea in his mind burst its way into my mind in a moment.

"Gracious God!" I exclaimed, "are you mad enough to suppose that Lucilla's sight can be restored, after a blindness of one-and-twenty years?"

He suddenly held up his hand, in sign to me to be silent.

At the same moment the door opened; and Lucilla (followed by Oscar) entered the room.