

Poor Miss Finch

by

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## 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 Re'publique!

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.

## 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.

## 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 curtsy, 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

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