

## Miscellaneous.

## THE SINGING SCHOOL ROMANCE.

[From the *Atlantic Monthly* for December.]

Father sits at the head of our pew. In old Indian times they say that the male head of the family always took that place, on account of the possible whoops of the savages, who sometimes came down on a congregation like wolves on the fold. It was necessary that the men should be able to rise at once to defend their families. Whatever the old reason was, the new is sufficient. Men must set near the pew doors now on account of the whoops of the ladies. The cause is different, the effect the same.

Father, then, sits at the head of the pew; mother next; Aunt Clara next; next I, and then Jerusha. That has been the arrangement ever since I can remember. Any change in our places would have been as fatal to our devotions as the dislodgment of Baron Rothschild from his particular pillar was once to the business of the London Stock Exchange. He could not negotiate if not at his post. We could not worship if not in our precise places. I think, by the fussing and fidgeting which taking seats in the church always causes, that everybody has the same feeling.

It was Sunday afternoon. The good minister, Parson Oliver, had finished his sermon. The text was—well I can't pretend to remember. Aunt Clara's behavior in meeting, and what she said to us that afternoon, have put the text, sermon and all out of my head forever. That is no matter; or rather, it is all the better; for when the same sermon comes again, in its triennial round, I shall not recognize an old acquaintance.

The sermon finished we took up our hymnbooks, of course. But the minister gave out no hymn. He sat down with a patient look at the choir as much as to say, "Now, do your worst!" Then we understood that we were to be treated to an extra performance, not in our books. There had been a renewal of interest in the choir, and there was a new singing master. We were to have the results of the late practicing and the first fruits of the new school. The piece they sung was that in which occur the lines:

"I'd soar and touch the heavenly strings,  
And vie with Gabriel, while he sings,  
In notes almost divine!"

We always, when we rise during the singing, face around to the choir. I don't know why. Perhaps it is to complete our view of the congregation, since during the rest of the time we looked the other way, and unless we faced about, should only see half. I like to peep at father, to see whether he appreciates the performance. To-day he just turned his head away. Mother sat down. Aunt Clara looked straight ahead, and her old fashioned bonnet hid her face; but I could discover that something more than usual was working under her cap. I looked at every one of the singers, and then at the players, from the big bass-viol down to the tenor, and not a bit of reason could I see for the twitter the heads of our pew had certainly got themselves into. There's a pattern old lady, Prudence Clark, presidentess of the Dorcas Society—a spinster, just Aunt Clara's age—a woman who knows everything and more too. She sets in the pew before us. She turned her head and gave a sly peep at Aunt Clara. They both laughed in meeting. I know they did, and they can't deny it. I peeped around at the minister, and, if he didn't laugh too, his face was scarlet, and he was taken with a wonderful fit of coughing. Such strange proceedings I had never seen. The minister, the deacon, (father is a deacon) and the oldest members were setting us young folks a bad example. But we tolerate anything in our good old parson. He was a youth when our old folks were young, and as to us young folks, he remembers us longer than we do ourselves.

We were all at home and tea was over—the early tea with substantial, as is the custom in primitive districts of New England on Sunday afternoon. The double accumulation of dishes were disposed of; for at noon we take a cold collation, doughnuts and cheese, and bread and butter, and we never descend to servile employments till after tea. Then many hands make light work. I suppose light work does not break the Sabbath, especially if it is done in our

Sunday best, with sleeves rolled up and an extra apron.

The laughing was a point upon which as yet we had obtained no satisfaction. Jerusha and I, in an uncertain hope that we should find out something in due time, were discussing the music. The particular point in debate was, why village choirs will astonish the people with pieces of music in which nobody can join them. We did not settle it, nor has anybody ever solved the riddle that I know of. We don't even know whether it comes under the notological or psychological departments. (There now! Haven't I brought in the famous words that our new schoolmaster astonished us with at the teachers' meeting? He need not think that Webster's Unabridged is his particular field, in which nobody else may hunt.)

We were, as I said, discussing the music. Mother was flitting round giving the final dust off and brush about after our early tea. Aunt Clara was sitting quietly at the window, pretending to read Baxter's *Saint's Rest*. Jerusha and I tried to imitate the tune, and we did it as well as we could, and I am sure we are not bad singers. Mother slipped out of the room just as we came to

"And vie with Gabriel, while he sings."

She ran as if something had stung her and she was making for the hartshorn or some fresh brook mud. Aunt Clara's face laughed all over, and I said:

"Come now, Aunt Clara, you are very irreverent. You began laughing in meeting, and you are keeping it up over that good book."

"Downright wicked," Jerusha.

Now I am a normal graduate, and Jerusha is not yet finished. That will account for the greater elegance of my expressions. Aunt Clara paid no heed to either of us, but laughed on. The most provoking thing in the world is a laugh you don't understand. Here was the whole Dorcas Society laughing through its presidentess, and Aunt Clara joining in the laugh at meeting, and aggravating the offense by stereotyping the smirk in her face. In came mother again, evidently afraid to stay out, and not liking for some reason to stay in. Again we tried the tune and got to

"And vie with Gabriel, while he sings."

Up jumped mother again, stopping in the door, and holding up a warning finger to Aunt Clara. That gesture spurred my curiosity to the utmost point. As to my beloved parent's running in and out, that I should not have heeded. She is like Martha, careful of many things. She is unlike Martha, for she wants no assistance; but when the rest of us are disposed to be quiet, she will keep flitting here and there, and is vexed at us if we follow. If father is talking, and has just reached the point of his story, off she goes, as if the common topic was nothing to her. Father says she is a perturbed spirit. But then, he is always saying queer things, which poor mother cannot understand. Aunt Clara seems to know him better. I wonder he had not taken to wife a woman like Aunt Clara. He would have taken her, I suppose, if she were not his own sister.

I besought mother, as she fled, to tell me what ailed aunt. "Don't ask me," she answered. "The dear only knows. As for me, I have given up thinking, let alone asking, what either your aunt or your father would be at." And away she went, perturbed-spirit fashion, and Aunt Clara laughed louder than ever. Indeed, before she had only chuckled and silently shaken her sides; now she broke into a scream.

"Well, I never!" she said. "That flounce of your mother's out of the room was certainly as much like old times as if the thing had happened yesterday."

"What happened yesterday?" asked Jerusha and I, both in a breath.

"Oh! I shall die out of laughing!" said Aunt Clara.

"We shall die of impatience!" said I, "if you don't tell us what you mean."

"No you won't. Nobody, especially no woman, ever yet died of unsatisfied curiosity. It rather keeps folks alive."

We very well knew that nothing could be made of Aunt Clara by teasing her. So Jerusha turned over the great family Bible, her custom always of a Sunday afternoon. Over her shoulder I happened to see that the good book was open at the first chapter of 1 Chronicles, "Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalaleel, Sared." Though her lips moved diligently, I am afraid she did not make much of it. As for me, I turned to the window and studied the landscape.

Father, his custom of a Sunday afternoon, walked down in the meadow, and the cattle came affectionately up to him. It was the salt in his broad pocket they were after. "I might salt them of a Monday," he says, "but they kind of look for it, and it isn't kind to disappoint the creatures on a Sabba'-day. And the merciful man is merciful to his beasts."

The flies droned and buzzed that summer afternoon. Jerusha nodded over the big Bible. Aunt Clara tried to look serious over the big book she held. But the latent laugh was coursing among the dimples in her face, like a spark among tinder. I stole up behind, and, leaning over her shoulder, kissed her.

"Oh, yes," said aunt. "Fine words butter no parsnips, and fine kisses are no better."

Jerusha's head made an awful plunge, then a reactionary lift back, and then she opened her eyes and mouth with such a yawn.

"Why, what a mouth!" I cried. "Master Minn would rejoice if you would thus open out in singing school,

"And vie with Gabriel, while he sings."

Off went Aunt Clara in a laugh again, and this time till tears came. We saw now that there was something in that line which provoked her mirth; but what Gabriel could have to do with her strange behavior we could not imagine, and were wisely silent.

"Girls," she said as soon as she could speak for laughing, "I will tell you."

We knew she would, provided we were not too anxious to hear. So Jerusha turned over her leaf to the second chapter of 1 Chronicles, "Reuben, Simeon, Levi." I pretended to be more than ever interested out of doors. Aunt Clara took off her specs, closed her book, smoothed her apron and began:

"When I was a girl—"

Now that we knew the story was coming, we pretended to no more indifference. Once get aunt started, like a horse baulky at the jump, she was good for the journey. So Jerusha shut the Bible, and we both sat down at her feet.

"Not quite so close, girls. It's dreadful warm."

Her faced worked and her sides heaved with her provoking laugh, and we were half afraid of a disappointment. But there was no danger. She was by this time quite as ready to tell as we were ready to hear.

"When I was a girl, I went to the singing school. Dear me, how many of the scholars are dead and gone! There was my brother William, poor fellow! he died of Calcutty. And Sarah Morgan, she never would own to it that she liked him. But actions speak plainer than words. She never held up her head after. And she's dead now, too."

Aunt Clara's face—she is a dear old aunt—had now lost every trace of mirth. The golden sunset touched her fine head, and made her look so sweetly beautiful that I wondered why no man had had the good taste, long ago, to relieve her of her maiden name. Perhaps she will tell us some day, and if she does, perhaps we will tell you. She sat two or three minutes, thinking and looking, as if she waited to see the loved and lost. There was a rustle, and she started from her reverie. It was only mother, flitting into the room with one of her uneasy glances. But we were all so still and serious and Sabbath-like, that a look of relief came over her countenance. She vanished again, and through the windows I saw her join her husband in the meadow.

"There, now, before they come in," said Aunt Clara. "When I was a girl, I went to singing-school. Dear me! But we will not think of the dead any more. There was one of the girls—she thought she had a very good voice. But she never sings now."

"Why?" asked Jerusha.

"The dear knows. I suppose because she is married. Married people never sing, I believe. So, girls, if you would keep your voices, you must stay single. Well, there was one of the boys, he thought he had a good voice. And he never sings now either."

"Why?" said I.

"Oh, he's married too. So don't you get cheated into thinking you have mated a robin. He will turn out a crow, like as any way. I suppose they both did have good voices, and for all that I know, they have still. They were the singing master's special wonders and his pattern pieces. He never was tired of praising them up to the skies, to mortify the rest of us into good be-

havior. She was the wonder for the girls' side, and he for the boys'—two copies that we were to sing up to. I think they were a little proud of the distinction. They were kind of brought up together by it, so that they did not see any harm at all in singing out of the same note book."

"I suppose not."

"Well, there was one girl in the school—dare say she was a giggling, mischief-making thing, for everybody said so—"

"Is she living now?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed."

"Does she sing now?" asked Serusha.

"Well—not much."

"Then," said I, "she must be married too."

"No, she is not," said Aunt Clara, with plaintive and very positive emphasis on the negative particle—"noshe is not."

"Nobody will look over the same note-book with her," said Jerusha.

"Oh, you girls may have your own fun now," said Aunt Clara. "You will see the world with a sadder face by and by."

"Not if we look at it through your spectacles aunt," I answered.

"Dear me; well the lord has been kind to me," said Aunt Clara, "if I am a spinster still. But we must make haste. The old folks are coming back."

"Old folks!" I thought, and Aunt Clara is older than either of them. Father stopped and gave an ugly weed a whack with his cane. Then he stopped and rooted it up, Sabbath day though it was. I presume he considered it an ox in a pit, for the moment.

Aunt Clara continued: "The same tune you were at this afternoon, used to be a great favorite in our school. It's as old as the hills. I wonder if Israel did not let his voice in it! And Sally, she wouldn't be behind him, I warrant you."

"Jerusha and I exchanged glances.

"It happened one evening—and that's what I was laughing at this afternoon. You see the singing-master, if the music was not going to suit him, would pull the class straight up in the middle of it, and make them begin again. The giggling girl that I was speaking of, she was always fuller of her own nonsense than of learning. This particular evening she was tempted of the Evil One to alter the words to her own purpose, just for the confusion of those so close to her; and a dreadful mess she would get them into. It was wrong, very wrong indeed." Aunt Clara added, with a face that was meant to be serious, while her voice laughed in spite of her.

"On this evening, they were singing the very tune, as I told you. Something went wrong. The singing-master stopped and called out to the class to stop singing. But the heedless girl had got into mischief, and could not stop with the rest, or she did not hear, or she did not wish to. So on she went all alone, right out, at the top of her voice:

"And vie with Israel, while he sings,  
In notes almost divine!"

"And there she broke down, and sat down, and, graceless hussy as she was, laughed as if she was mad. The truth was that 'vying with Israel' was a by-word with us. We were always teasing Sally about her vying with Israel, as she certainly did, while they sung out of the same book, and thought a deal more of each other than they did of the music. Everybody took the joke, and such a time as there was! Prudence Clark, who turned round and looked at me in meeting today, she laughed the most spitefully of anybody, she had a great notion of your fath—I mean of Israel. As to Israel and Sarah, if ever you did see two persons who did not know whether to stand still or to run, to cry or to laugh, they were the couple. The master he tried to read us a solemn lecture; but he was so full of suppressed fun, that he hugged his viol under his arm till one of the strings snapped. That gave the pitch, and we had a laughing chorus. All joined in, except Israel and Sarah. She pouted, and I do believe he grit his teeth." Here Aunt Clara gave herself up to the comic reminiscence, till her eyes filled again.

"Well, and what came of it all?" asked Jerusha.

"Why, it broke up the school for that season, and made town-talk for nine days. Parson Oliver—he was a young man then,—he went for to give the mischievous girl a good talking to. He need not have tried that; for he was too young to scold a young girl, full of mischief, and, though I say it, that shouldn't say it, rather pretty."