

***DAVID CHRISTIE
MURRAY***



***AUNT
RACHEL***

David Christie Murray

Aunt Rachel

A Rustic Sentimental Comedy

EAN 8596547216148

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Author Of “First Person Singular” “Rainbow Gold” Etc. 1880](#)

[PREFACE.](#)

[AUNT RACHEL.](#)

[A Rustic Sentimental Comedy.](#)

[CHAPTER I.](#)

[CHAPTER II.](#)

[CHAPTER III.](#)

[CHAPTER IV.](#)

[CHAPTER V.](#)

[CHAPTER VI.](#)

[CHAPTER VII.](#)

[CHAPTER VIII.](#)

[CHAPTER IX.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER X.](#)

[CHAPTER XII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIII.](#)

[CHAPTER XIV.](#)

Author Of “First Person Singular” “Rainbow Gold” Etc.

1880

[Table of Contents](#)

PREFACE.

[Table of Contents](#)

A critic, otherwise almost altogether friendly, protests, in reviewing a recent book of mine, that no rustics ever would, could, or will talk in real life as the rustics in that work are made to talk by me. Since this criticism might apply still more pointedly, if it were true, to “Aunt Rachel” than to “Rainbow Gold,” I desire to say a word or two in self-defence. A little, a very little, of the average rustic would go a long way in fiction. But I do not profess to deal with the average rustic. I deal, and love to deal, with the rustic exceptional, the village notable and wiseacre. Observant readers will have noticed that the date of one story is 1853, and that the epoch of the other is remoter by a dozen years. In my boyhood, in the Staffordshire Black Country, the rustic

people were saturated with the speech of the Bible, the Church Service, and the "Pilgrim's Progress." It is otherwise to-day, and their English, when it pretends at all to a literary flavor, is the English of the local weekly paper. The gravity, the slow sententiousness, and purposed wisdom of the utterances of more than one or two knots of habitual companions whom I can recall, were outside the chances of exaggeration. Often these people were really wise and witty. They were the makers of the local proverbial philosophy, and many of their phrases are alive today. I recall and could set down here a score of the quaintest bits of humor and good-sense, and one or two things genuinely poetical, which were spoken in my childish hearing. But I refrain myself easily from this temptation, because I have not written my last Black Country story, and prefer to put these things in a form as near their own as I can achieve. I only desire to say that I have *not* exaggerated, but have fallen short of the characteristics I have had to deal with.

D. Christie Murray.

Rochefort, Belgium, December, 1885.

AUNT RACHEL.

[Table of Contents](#)

A Rustic Sentimental Comedy.

[Table of Contents](#)

CHAPTER I.

[Table of Contents](#)

A quartette party—three violins and a 'cello—sat in summer evening weather in a garden. This garden was full of bloom and odor, and was shut in by high walls of ripe old brick. Here and there were large-sized plaster casts—Venus, Minerva, Mercury, a goat-hoofed Pan with his pipes, a Silence with a finger at her lips. They were all sylvan green and crumbled with exposure to the weather, so that, in spite of cheapness, they gave the place a certain Old-world and stately aspect to an observer who was disposed to think so and did not care to look at them too curiously. A square deal table with bare top and painted legs was set on the grass-plot beneath a gnarled apple-tree whose branches were thick with green fruit, and the quartette party sat about this table, each player with his music spread out before him on a portable little folding stand.

Three of the players were old, stout, gray, and spectacled. The fourth was young and handsome, with dreamy gray-blue eyes and a mass of chestnut-colored hair. There was an audience of two—an old man and a girl. The old man stood at the back of the chair of the youngest player, turning his music for him, and beating time with one foot upon the grass. The girl, with twined fingers, leaned both palms on the trunk of the apple-tree, and reposed a clear-colored cheek on her rounded arm, looking downward with a listening air. The youngest player never glanced at the sheets which the old man so assiduously turned for him, but looked straight forward at the girl, his eyes brightening

or dreaming at the music. The three seniors ploughed away business-like, with intent frownings, and the man who played the 'cello counted beneath his breath, "One, two, three, four—one, two, three, four," inhaling his breath on one set of figures and blowing on the next.

The movement closed, and the three seniors looked at each other like men who were satisfied with themselves and their companions.

"Lads," said the man with the 'cello, in a fat and comfortable voice, "that was proper! He's a pretty writer, this here Bee-thoven. Rewben, the hallygro's a twister, I can tell thee. Thee hadst better grease thy elbow afore we start on it. Ruth, fetch a jug o' beer, theer's a good wench. I'm as dry as Bill Duke. Thee canst do a drop, 'Saiah, / know."

"Why, yes," returned the second-fiddle. "Theer's a warmish bit afore us, and it's well to have summat to work on."

The girl moved away slowly, her fingers still knitted and her palms turned to the ground. An inward-looking smile, called up by the music, lingered in her eyes, which were of a warm, soft brown.

"Reuben," said the second-fiddle, "thee hast thy uncle's method all over. I could shut my eyes an' think as I was five-and-twenty 'ear younger, and as he was a-playin'. Dost note the tone, Sennacherib?"

"Note it?" said the third senior. "It's theer to be noted. Our 'Saiah's got it drove into him somehow, as he's the one in Heydon Hay as God A'mighty's gi'en a pair of ears to."

"An' our Sennacherib," retorted Isaiah, "is the one as carries Natur's license t' offer the rough side of his tongue to

everybody."

"I know it's a compliment," said the younger man, "to say I have my uncle's hand, though I never heard my uncle play."

"No, lad," said the old man who stood behind his chair. "Thee'rt a finer player than ever I was. If I'd played as well as thee I might have held on at it, though even then it ud ha' gone a bit agen the grain."

"Agen the grain?" asked the 'cello-player, in his cheery voice. "With a tone like that? Why, I mek bold to tell you, Mr. Gold, as theer is not a hammer-chewer on the fiddle, not for thirty or may be forty mile around, as has a tone to name in the same day with Rewben."

"There's a deal in what you say, Mr. Fuller," said the old man, who had a bearing of sad and gentle dignity, and gave, in a curious and not easily explainable way, the idea that he spoke but seldom and was something of a recluse. "There's a deal in what you say, Mr. Fuller, but the fiddle is not a thing as can be played like any ordinary instrymment. A fiddle's like a wife, in a way of speaking. You must offer her all you've got. If she catches you going about after other women—"

"It's woe betide you!" Sennacherib interrupted.

"You drive her heart away," the old man pursued. "The fiddle's jealouser than a woman. It wants the whole of a man. If Reuben was to settle down to it twelve hours a day, I make no doubt he'd be a player in a few years' time."

"Twelve hours a day!" cried Sennacherib. "D'ye think as life was gi'en to us to pass it all away a scrapin' catgut?"

“Why, no, Mr. Eld,” the old man answered, smilingly. “But to my mind there's only two or three men in the world at any particular space o' given time as has the power gi'en 'em by Nature to be fiddlers; that is to say, as has all the qualities to be masters of the instrymment. It is so ordered as the best of qualities must be practised to be perfect, and howsoever a man may be qualified to begin with, he must work hour by hour and day by day for years afore he plays the fiddle.”

“I look upon any such doctrine as a sinful crime,” said Sennacherib. “The fiddle is a recreation, and was gi'en us for that end. So, in a way, for them as likes it, is skittles. So is marvils, or kite-flyin', or kiss-i'-the-ring. But to talk of a man sittin' on his hinder end, and draggin' rosined hosshair across catgut hour by hour and day by day for 'ears, is a doctrine as I should like to hear Parson Hales's opinion on, if ever it was to get broached afore him.”

“Ruth,” called the 'cello-player, as the girl reappeared, bearing a tray with a huge jug and glasses, “come along with the beer. And when we've had a drink, lads, well have a cut at the hallygro. It's marked 'vivaysy,' Reuben, an' it'll tek thee all thy time to get the twirls and twiddles i' the right placen.”

Ruth poured out a glass of beer for each of the players, and, having set the tray and jug upon the grass, took up her former place and position by the apple-tree.

“Wheer's your rosin, 'Saiah?” asked Sennacherib.

“I forgot to bring it wi' me,” said Isaiah. “I took it out of the case last night, and was that neglectful as I forgot to put it back again.”

“My blessid!” cried Sennacherib, “I niver see such a man!”

“Well, well!” said the 'cello-player, “here's a bit. You seem to ha' forgot your own.”

“What's that got to do wi' it?” Sennacherib demanded. “I shall live to learn as two blacks mek a white by-an'-by, I reckon. There niver was a party o' four but there was three wooden heads among 'em.” The girl glanced over her arm, and looked with dancing eyes at the youngest of the party. He, feeling Sennacherib's eye upon him, contrived to keep a grave face. The host gave the word and the four set to work, Reuben playing with genuine fire, and his companions sawing away with a dogged precision which made them agreeable enough to listen to, but droll to look at. Ruth, with her chin upon her dimpled arm, watched Reuben as he played. He had tossed back his chestnut mane of hair rather proudly as he tucked his violin beneath his chin, and had looked round on his three seniors with the air of a master as he held his bow poised in readiness to descend upon the strings. His short upper lip and full lower lip came together firmly, his brows straightened, and his nostrils contracted a little. Ruth admired him demurely, and he gave her ample opportunity, for this time he kept his eyes upon the text. She watched him to the last stroke of the bow, and then, shifting her glance, met the grave, fixed look of the old man who stood behind his chair. At this, conscious of the fashion in which her last five minutes had been passed, she blushed, and to carry this off with as good a grace as might be, she began to applaud with both hands.

“Bravo, father! bravo! Capital, Mr. Eld! capital!”

"Theer," said Sennacherib, ignoring the compliment, and scowling in a sort of dogged triumph at the placid old man behind Reuben's chair, "d'ye think as *that* could be beat if we spent forty 'ear at it? Theer wa'n't a fause note from start to finish, and time was kep' like a clock."

"It's a warmish bit o' work, that hallygro," said old Fuller, in milder self-gratulation, as he disposed his 'cello between his knees, and mopped his bald forehead. "A warmish bit o' work it is."

"Come, now," said Sennacherib, "d'ye think as it could be beat? A civil answer to a civil question is no more than a beggar's rights, and no less than a king's obligingness."

"It was wonderful well played, Mr. Eld," the old man answered.

"Beat!" said Isaiah. "Why it stands to natur' as it could be beat. D'ye think Paganyni couldn't play a better second fiddle than I can?"

"Ought to play second fiddle pretty well thyself," returned Sennacherib. "Hast been at it all thy life. Ever since thee was married, annyway."

"Come, come, come," said the fat 'cello-player. "Harmony, lads, harmony! How was it, Mr. Gold, as you come to give up the music. Theer's them as is entitled to speak, and has lived i' the parish longer than I have, as holds you up to have been a real noble player."

"There's them," the old man answered, "as would think the parish church the finest buildin' i' the king-dom. But they wouldn't be them as had seen the glories of Lichfield cathedral."

"I'm speakin' after them as thinks they have a right to talk," said the other.

"I might at my best day have come pretty nigh to Reuben," the old man allowed, "though I never was his equal. But as for a real noble player—"

"Well, well," said Fuller, "it ain't a hammer-chewer in a county as plays like Reuben. Give Mr. Gold a chair, Ruth. I should like to hear what might ha' made a man throw it over as had iver got as far."

"I heard Paganini," the old man answered. "I was up in London rather better than six-and-twenty year ago, and I heard Paganini."

"Well?" asked Fuller.

"That's all the story," said the old man, seating himself in the chair the girl had brought him. "I never cared to touch a bow again."

"I don't seem to follow you, Mr. Gold."

"I have never been a wine-drinker," said Gold, "but I may speak of wine to make clear my mean-in'. If you had been drinkin' a wonderful fine glass of port or sherry wine, you wouldn't try to take the taste out of your mouth with varjuice."

"I've tasted both," said the 'cello-player, "but they niver sp'iled my mouth for a glass of honest beer."

"I can listen to middlin'-class music now," said Gold, "and find a pleasure in it. But for a time I could not bring myself to take any sort of joy in music. You think it foolish? Well, perhaps it was. I am not careful to defend it, gentlemen, and it may happen that I might not if I tried. But that was how I came to give up the fiddle. He was a wonder of the world,

was Paganini. He was no more like a common man than his fiddlin' was like common fiddlin'. There was things he played that made the blood run cold all down the back, and laid a sort of terror on you."

"I felt like that at the 'Hallelujah' first time I heerd it," said Isaiah. "Band an' chorus of a hundred. It was when they opened the big Wesley Chapel at Barfield twenty 'ear ago."

"We'll tek a turn at Haydn now, lads," said the host, genially.

"I'm sorry to break the party up so soon," Reuben answered, "but I must go. There are people come to tea at father's, and I was blamed for coming away at all. I promised to get back early and give them a tune or two." He arose, and, taking his violin-case from the grass, wiped it carefully all over with his pocket-handkerchief. "I was bade to ask you, sir, if Miss Ruth might come and pass an hour or two. My mother would be particularly pleased to see her, I was to say."

The young fellow was blushing fierily as he spoke, but no one noticed this except the girl.

"Go up, my gell, and spend an hour or two," said her father. "Reuben 'll squire thee home again."

"Wait while I put on my bonnet," she said, as she ran past Reuben into the house. Reuben blushed a little deeper yet, and knelt over his violin-case on the grass, where he swaddled the instrument as if it had been a baby, and bestowed it in its place with unusual care and solicitude.

"Reuben," said his uncle, as the young man arose, "that's a thing as never should be done." The young man looked inquiry. "The poor thing's screwed up to pitch," the old man

explained, almost sternly. "Ease her down, lad, ease her down. The strain upon a fiddle is a thing too little thought upon. You get a couple o' strong men one o' these days, and make 'em pull at a set of strings, and see if they'll get them up to concert pitch! I doubt if they'd do it, lad, or anything like. And there's all that strain on a frail shell like that. I've ached to think of it, many a time. A man who carries a weight about all day puts it off to go to bed." "Wondrous delicate an' powerful thing," said old Fuller. "Reminds you o' some o' them delicate-lookin' women as'll goo through wi' a lot more in the way o' pain-bearin' than iver a man wool."

"Rubbridge!" said Sennacherib. "You'd think the women bear a lot. They mek a outcry, to be sure, but theer's a lot more chatter than work about a woman's sufferin', just as theer is about everythin' else her does. Dost remember what the vicar said last Sunday was a wick? It 'ud be a crime, he said, to think as the Lord made the things as is lower in the scale o' natur' than we be to feel like us. The lower the scale the less the feelin'. Stands to rayson, that does. I mek no manner of a doubt as he's got Scriptor for it."

"Lower in the scale of natur', Mr. Eld?" said Gold, turning his ascetic face and mournful eyes upon Sennacherib.

"Theer's two things," returned Sennacherib, "as a man o' sense has no particular liking to. He'll niver ask to have his cabbage twice b'iled, nor plain words twice spoke. I said 'Lower in the scale o' na-tur'.' Mek the most on it."

Sennacherib was short but burly, and between him and Gold there was very much the sort of contrast which exists between a mastiff and a deer-hound.

"I will not make the most of it, Mr. Eld," the old man said, with a transient smile. "I might think poorlier of you than I've a right to if I did. When a rose is held lower in the scale of natur' than a turnip, or the mastership in music is gi'en in again the fiddle in favor o' the hurdy-gurdy, I'll begin to think as you and me is better specimens of natur's handiwork than this here gracious bit o' sweetness as is coming towards us at this minute. Good-evenin', Mr. Eld. Good-evenin', Isaiah. Good-evenin', Mr. Fuller. Good-evenin', Reuben. No, I'm not goin' thy way, lad. Call o' me to-morrow; I've a thing to speak of. Good-evenin', Miss Ruth."

When he had spoken his last good-by he folded his gaunt hands behind him and walked away slowly, his shoulders rounded with an habitual stoop and his eyes upon the ground. Ruth and Reuben followed, and the three seniors reseated themselves, and each with one consent reached out his hand to his tumbler.

"Theer's a kind of a mildness o' natur' in Ezra Gold," said Isaiah, passing the back of his hand across his lips, "as gives me a curious sort o' likin' for him."

"Theer's a kind of a mildness o' natur' in a crab-apple," said Sennacherib, "as sets my teeth on edge."

"Come, come, lads, harmony!" said Fuller. He laid hold of his great waistcoat with the palms of both hands and agitated it gently. "It beats me," he said, "to think of his layin' by the music in that way, and for sich a cause."

"Well," said Sennacherib, "I'll tell thee why he laid by the music. I wonder at Gold settlin' up to git over men like me with a stoory so onlikely."

“What was it, then?” asked Isaiah, bestowing a wink on Fuller.

“It was a wench as did it,” said Sennacherib. “He was allays a man as took his time to think about a thing. If he'd been a farmer he'd ha' turned the odds about and about wi' regards to gettin' his seed into the ground till somebody 'ud ha' told him it 'ud be Christmas-day next Monday. He behaved i' that way wi' regards to matrimony. He put off thinkin' on it till he was nigh on forty—six-an'-thirty he was at the lowest. Even when he seemed to ha' made up what mind he'd got he'd goo and fiddle to the wench instead o' courtin' her like a Christian, or sometimes the wench 'ud mek a visit to his mother, and then he'd fiddle to her at hum. He made eyes at her for all the parish to see, and the young woman waited most tynacious. But when her had been fiddled at for three or four 'ear, her begun to see as her was under no sort o' peril o' losin' her maiden name with Ezra. So her walked theer an' then—made up her mind an' walked at once—went into some foreign part of the country to see if her couldn't find somebody theer as'd fancy a nice-lookin' wench, and tek less time to find out what he'd took a likin' for.”

“Was that it?” asked Isaiah, with the manner of a man who finds an explanation for an old puzzle. “That 'ud be Rachel Blythe.”

“A quick eye our 'Saiah's got,” said Sennacherib. “He can see a hole through a ladder when somebody's polished his glasses. Rachel Blythe was the wench's name. Her was a little slip of a creator', no higher than a well-grown gell o' twelve, but pretty in a sort o' way.”

“Why, Jabez, lad,” cried Isaiah, “thee lookest like a stuck pig. What's the matter?”

The host's eyes were rounded with astonishment, and he was staring from one of his guests to the other with an air of fatuous wonder.

“Why,” said he, with an emphasis of astonishment which seemed not altogether in keeping with so simple a discovery, “this here Rachel Blythe was my first wife's second cousin. Our Fanny Jane used to be talkin' about her constant. Her had offers by the baker's dozen, so it seemed, but her could never be brought to marry. Fanny Jane was a woman as was gi'en a good deal up to sentiment, and her was used to say the gell's heart was fixed on somebody at Heydon Hay. It 'ud seem to come in wi' the probability of things as they might have had a sort of a shortness betwixt 'em, and parted.”

“Theer was nobody after her here but Ezra Gold,” said Sennacherib. “Nobody. I niver heard, howsever, as they got to be hintimate enough to quarrel. But as for Paganyni, that's rubbidge. The man played regular till Rachel Blythe left the parish, and then he stopped.”

“Well, well,” said the host, contemplatively, “it's too late in life for both on 'em. Her's back again. Made us a visit yesterday. Her's took that little cottage o' Mother Duke's on the Barfield Road.”

“Bless my soul!” said Isaiah. “I seen her yesterday as I was takin' my walks abroad. But, Jabez, lad, her's as withered as a chip! The littlest, wizen-edest, tiniest little old woman as ever I set eyes on. Dear me! dear me! To think as six-an'-twenty 'ear should mek such a difference. Her gi'en

me a nod and a smile as I went by, but I niver guessed as it was Rachel Blythe."

"Rachel Blythe it was, though," returned old Fuller. "Well, well! To think as her and Mr. Gold should ha' kep' single one for another. Here's a bit of a treeho, lads, as I bought in Brummagem the day afore yesterday. It's by that new chap as wrote 'Elijah' for the festival. Let's see. What's his name again? Mendelssohn. Shall us have a try at it?"