

# Putting the Pieces in Place

*by*

*R.B. Russell*



EX OCCIDENTE PRESS  
Bucharest ■ MMIX

*Putting the Pieces in Place*  
by R.B. Russell

First published by Ex Occidente Press,  
in January, MMIX  
exoccidente@gmail.com

Stories © R.B. Russell, MMIX  
Frontispiece photograph © yomgaille.com, MMIX

*With many thanks to Rosalie Parker,  
Jim Rockhill, Lidwine de Roye and Dan T. Ghetu.*

Printed at Mad Linotype.  
Musaios, Buzau.

*“Putting the Pieces in Place” is limited to 400 copies.*

ISBN 978-973-7764-15-7

EX OCCIDENTE PRESS  
Bucharest ■ MMIX

## *Putting the Pieces in Place*

The tape came off the first reel, threaded its way through the guides and heads, and flapped uselessly, rhythmically, as the full spool continued to turn. Nicolas Porter opened his eyes at the noise but presumably did not want to believe that the music of Emily Butler had come to an end. Finally, with a smile in the direction of the young woman opposite him and also with a sigh, he got up out of his armchair and walked over to the vintage reel-to-reel machine and switched it off.

‘This’ll need rewinding, I take it?’ he asked.

‘As you’ve only got one tape I wouldn’t bother,’ Beatrice Grant replied. ‘Just change the two reels over and it’s ready to play again.’

‘But the tape is not now on its original reel!’

‘It will be after you’ve played it next.’

He paused and considered:

‘I have to admit that I am a little precious about such things. You know what obsessive collectors are like?’

Beatrice Grant said that she didn’t, that she had never felt the urge to collect anything, and he gave a short, self-deprecating lecture on how passionate collectors can be about the smallest of things. When he had finished he smiled again, rather guiltily, and said:

*Putting the Pieces in Place*

‘But that did sound absolutely wonderful. It was everything I dreamed it would be. I suppose I should get a copy made; as a back-up?’

‘That would be sensible, yes.’

‘Hmm,’ he considered, ‘but no copy will ever sound quite as good as hearing it on that old analogue tape.’

‘I suppose it’s like you reading one of your first editions,’ she suggested, ‘on lovely paper, and a nice binding; the words are still the same as in a cheap paperback, but the experience is different.’

‘I don’t know if it is quite the same analogy,’ he replied, slowly, giving it consideration. ‘The process of hearing is different. Analogue is warmer, more natural. The bass is thickened up, giving it a fuller sound. It compresses the high end a little too, which is more natural to the ear. . . .’

‘Alright,’ she held up her hand to stop him. ‘I believe you. I defer to you in all matters musical as well as literary.’

‘But you can still tell me what you thought of the music?’

‘It was quite beautiful, but classical music isn’t my forte, you know? It’s obviously very skilful, and sounds romantic . . . The tone is wonderful.’

‘Emily was playing Mozart’s Third, on a reproduction Stradivarius. And we had to listen to this tape on an original RCA reel-to-reel player; I’m pretty sure that’s what she would’ve recorded it on in the first place. I’ve got a photo of her with this very machine in the background.’

‘You really are obsessive, aren’t you?’

‘You don’t know the half of it, my dear,’ he said, with an affected movement of his hand over his brow. ‘But *you* are the heroine of the hour.’

*Putting the Pieces in Place*

‘I couldn’t have tracked it down without the information you gave me.’

‘I have made my living, and my money, by being a literary detective, you know. I have some idea of how these things are done . . .’ He turned off the tape player’s power at the wall, and then walked over to the bottle of wine which had been warming, open, by the fire. ‘Now, would you like a glass? We agreed that we wouldn’t drink anything until we had heard the tape.’

‘Yes, please. I think we have something to celebrate, don’t you? Although my detective work isn’t quite of the same order as yours . . .’

‘For me, personally, what you’ve brought along tonight excels my greatest finds.’

‘What, even the *Medea*?’ she was incredulous.

For Nicolas Porter it was. He knew that the world of classical literature was all the richer for his discovery; he had not needed the eminent figures in the literary world to tell him that. The person that he had been the most pleased to inform of his discovery, though, was his father, who had taught classics at Newcastle University. Porter was secretly pleased to have risen in the old man’s estimation; his father had believed his son to be the philistine of the family because he had never been able to hold a pencil, brush or bow. His sisters had been the artistic ones, he was always told, and then he unearthed the full text of Ovid’s *Medea* and their achievements had been eclipsed overnight.

‘I don’t know anything about literature,’ Beatrice Grant continued, ‘especially classical literature, but you managed to appear on the front pages of some serious newspapers.’

And, he considered, he had earned himself enough money that he no longer needed to haunt provincial

*Putting the Pieces in Place*

auction salerooms, and track down the relicts of authors in the hope of unearthing a cache of unpublished novels.

‘I won’t ask you how much you got for it . . . ?’

‘Good!’ he declared, in part because he was not sure that he knew himself; not exactly. He had no idea how much he had spent getting it authenticated, but the debts had kept growing. When he finally sold it at auction the previous year all of the newspapers reported the headline sum, but that was only half of the story. It was bought by an anonymous philanthropist on behalf of a museum, and they’d still not settled the full amount because they had a deal with a publisher who had yet to contribute their payment in lieu of a royalty.

‘But will you tell me how you came by it?’

‘There are legal reasons why I’d better not.’

‘Oh.’ She was slightly crestfallen.

‘Well, if I don’t name names . . .’ he agreed. ‘It is incredibly convoluted because the collector who owned it had originally acquired it from an institution thirty years ago. As far as *they* knew it was just some early Latin manuscript, and the collector who bought it from them didn’t know any better for the first few years. When he came to read it he had his suspicions that it was copied from a far earlier Greek source, but I don’t think he ever got it authenticated. When I discovered, from the records of that institution, exactly who they had sold it to, I asked the owner if I could see it, but he refused. He wasn’t one of those collectors who like to share their treasures, even to impress, or to make other collectors envious. Then, when he died, his widow sold it to me, knowing that it had value, but not knowing what on earth it was.’

‘And the problem is?’

*Putting the Pieces in Place*

‘Not only is the widow who sold me the *Medea* threatening to take me to court, claiming I should have paid her more, but the original institution who sold it to her husband is threatening to do the same.’

‘Will they get anywhere?’

‘I don’t know, and frankly, at this very moment I don’t care.’

‘But you’re still happy that you’ve paid me ten thousand pounds for the tape now that you’ve listened to it?’

‘Of course! I haven’t heard that music for forty years and it still sounds wonderful.’

‘You mean, you’ve heard it before?’

‘Yes, I’ve heard it before. There was a very sentimental reason for wanting that tape. And I’ve reached an age, and financial comfort, that allows me to indulge such sentimentality. Let me show you.’

He put down his wine and walked over to a case on a table next to a music stand. With great care and reverence he took out a violin.

‘This is the very instrument that Emily Butler plays on that recording.’

‘How on earth did you track that down?’ she asked, standing up to take a look, although he possessively kept hold of it.

‘I have a contact in the world of violins who is the counterpart of me in the literary world. You see, although it isn’t a Stradivarius, as was thought for many years, it is a very good, early copy, and has a lovely sound. Really good violins need provenance, and this one came up with an impeccable record of ownership. I know for a fact that it was hers.’

‘You really are an obsessive. . . .’

‘You don’t know the half of it!’

*Putting the Pieces in Place*

‘Surprise me.’

‘Alright. How about if I told you that this house was once where she lived?’

Beatrice Grant laughed at this: ‘I am seriously impressed. I suppose there was a certain amount of luck involved, though.’

‘In what way?’

‘In the house becoming available?’

‘For all collectors there’s some luck, but if you are serious you usually have to persuade people to make things become available, and not just wait. But in the case of this house, it had been empty for years.’

‘What, a desirable property like this?’

‘Yes, but it has some serious drawbacks.’

‘In what way?’

‘The whole of the front façade has subsided and should really be rebuilt. It would be cheaper to pull the whole place down and start again, but it’s Listed and the planners wouldn’t hear of it. And so it’s been allowed to decay, and has inevitably fallen into a worse and worse condition. And, of course, it has the reputation of being haunted.’

‘Splendid! What kind of ghost? . . . Not your violin player?’

He looked slightly uncomfortable.

‘It is!’ she clapped her hands with delight. ‘You are the most committed collector I’ve ever come across. It’s not good enough just to have her music, and the instrument she played it on, or even the house she lived in, but you must have her ghost as well!’

‘So,’ she asked, after a suitable pause, ‘have you seen her?’

He looked up at the ceiling and admitted, reluctantly, that he had not.

*Putting the Pieces in Place*

‘But it’s not a visual ghost,’ he explained. ‘It’s an audible one. It is said that music can sometimes be heard coming from this house.’

‘Violin music?’

‘Of that I’m not sure. You see, I’ve asked around and although everyone knows the story, I can’t find anyone who will admit to having heard anything themselves.’

‘Are the stories recent?’

‘I never heard them when I was living in the area, up to the early seventies. Emily drowned in a tragic boating accident in 1975, and I assume the stories date from after that. . . .’

‘So, how long have you been living here?’

‘Only a couple of months. I bought the place a year ago, but it’s taken that long for the builders to make it habitable again.’

She sat back down in her chair and savoured the delicious tale.

‘You do realise that your ghost isn’t likely to play any music for you? Not if you are constantly listening out for her?’

‘I know, I know. And the odds are that if I not only heard but saw the ghost, I’d discover that it was her mother, or her father. The thing is, I don’t even believe in ghosts. I’ve never seen one, and don’t really expect to.’

‘But, you’d be happy to meet a ghost if she happened to be the right one?’

‘Of course.’

continued . . . .