

CHAPTER X. Gideon Forsyth and the Broadwood Grand

The reader has perhaps read that remarkable work, *Who Put Back the Clock?* by E. H. B., which appeared for several days upon the railway bookstalls and then vanished entirely from the face of the earth. Whether eating Time makes the chief of his diet out of old editions; whether Providence has passed a special enactment on behalf of authors; or whether these last have taken the law into their own hand, bound themselves into a dark conspiracy with a password, which I would die rather than reveal, and night after night sally forth under some vigorous leader, such as Mr James Payn or Mr Walter Besant, on their task of secret spoliation--certain it is, at least, that the old editions pass, giving place to new. To the proof, it is believed there are now only three copies extant of *Who Put Back the Clock?* one in the British Museum, successfully concealed by a wrong entry in the catalogue; another in one of the cellars (the cellar where the music accumulates) of the Advocates' Library at Edinburgh; and a third, bound in morocco, in the possession of Gideon Forsyth. To account for the very different fate attending this third exemplar, the readiest theory is to suppose that Gideon admired the tale. How to explain that admiration might appear (to those who have perused the work) more difficult; but the weakness of a parent is extreme, and Gideon (and not his uncle, whose initials he had humorously borrowed) was the author of *Who Put Back the Clock?* He had never acknowledged it, or only to some intimate friends while it was still in proof; after its appearance and alarming failure, the modesty of the novelist had become more pressing, and the

secret was now likely to be better kept than that of the authorship of Waverley.

A copy of the work (for the date of my tale is already yesterday) still figured in dusty solitude in the bookstall at Waterloo; and Gideon, as he passed with his ticket for Hampton Court, smiled contemptuously at the creature of his thoughts. What an idle ambition was the author's! How far beneath him was the practice of that childish art! With his hand closing on his first brief, he felt himself a man at last; and the muse who presides over the police romance, a lady presumably of French extraction, fled his neighbourhood, and returned to join the dance round the springs of Helicon, among her Grecian sisters.

Robust, practical reflection still cheered the young barrister upon his journey. Again and again he selected the little country-house in its islet of great oaks, which he was to make his future home. Like a prudent householder, he projected improvements as he passed; to one he added a stable, to another a tennis-court, a third he supplied with a becoming rustic boat-house.

'How little a while ago,' he could not but reflect, 'I was a careless young dog with no thought but to be comfortable! I cared for nothing but boating and detective novels. I would have passed an old-fashioned country-house with large kitchen-garden, stabling, boat-house, and spacious offices, without so much as a look, and certainly would have made no enquiry as to the drains. How a man ripens with the years!'

The intelligent reader will perceive the ravages of Miss Hazeltine. Gideon had carried Julia straight to Mr Bloomfield's house; and that gentleman, having been led to understand she was the victim of oppression, had noisily espoused her cause. He worked himself into a fine breathing heat; in which, to a man of his temperament, action became needful.

'I do not know which is the worse,' he cried, 'the fraudulent old villain or the unmanly young cub. I will write to the Pall Mall and expose them. Nonsense, sir; they must be exposed! It's a public duty. Did you not tell me the fellow was a Tory? O, the uncle is a Radical lecturer, is he? No doubt the uncle has been grossly wronged. But of course, as you say, that makes a change; it becomes scarce so much a public duty.'

And he sought and instantly found a fresh outlet for his alacrity. Miss Hazeltine (he now perceived) must be kept out of the way; his houseboat was lying ready--he had returned but a day or two before from his usual cruise; there was no place like a houseboat for concealment; and that very morning, in the teeth of the easterly gale, Mr and Mrs Bloomfield and Miss Julia Hazeltine had started forth on their untimely voyage. Gideon pled in vain to be allowed to join the party. 'No, Gid,' said his uncle. 'You will be watched; you must keep away from us.' Nor had the barrister ventured to contest this strange illusion; for he feared if he rubbed off any of the romance, that Mr Bloomfield might weary of the

whole affair. And his discretion was rewarded; for the Squirradical, laying a heavy hand upon his nephew's shoulder, had added these notable expressions: 'I see what you are after, Gid. But if you're going to get the girl, you have to work, sir.'

These pleasing sounds had cheered the barrister all day, as he sat reading in chambers; they continued to form the ground-base of his manly musings as he was whirled to Hampton Court; even when he landed at the station, and began to pull himself together for his delicate interview, the voice of Uncle Ned and the eyes of Julia were not forgotten.

But now it began to rain surprises: in all Hampton Court there was no Kurnaul Villa, no Count Tarnow, and no count. This was strange; but, viewed in the light of the incoherency of his instructions, not perhaps inexplicable; Mr Dickson had been lunching, and he might have made some fatal oversight in the address. What was the thoroughly prompt, manly, and businesslike step? thought Gideon; and he answered himself at once: 'A telegram, very laconic.' Speedily the wires were flashing the following very important missive: 'Dickson, Langham Hotel. Villa and persons both unknown here, suppose erroneous address; follow self next train.--Forsyth.' And at the Langham Hotel, sure enough, with a brow expressive of dispatch and intellectual effort, Gideon descended not long after from a smoking hansom.

I do not suppose that Gideon will ever forget the Langham Hotel. No Count Tarnow was one thing; no John Dickson and no Ezra Thomas, quite

another. How, why, and what next, danced in his bewildered brain; from every centre of what we playfully call the human intellect incongruous messages were telegraphed; and before the hubbub of dismay had quite subsided, the barrister found himself driving furiously for his chambers. There was at least a cave of refuge; it was at least a place to think in; and he climbed the stair, put his key in the lock and opened the door, with some approach to hope.

It was all dark within, for the night had some time fallen; but Gideon knew his room, he knew where the matches stood on the end of the chimney-piece; and he advanced boldly, and in so doing dashed himself against a heavy body; where (slightly altering the expressions of the song) no heavy body should have been. There had been nothing there when Gideon went out; he had locked the door behind him, he had found it locked on his return, no one could have entered, the furniture could not have changed its own position. And yet undeniably there was a something there. He thrust out his hands in the darkness. Yes, there was something, something large, something smooth, something cold.

'Heaven forgive me!' said Gideon, 'it feels like a piano.'

And the next moment he remembered the vestas in his waistcoat pocket and had struck a light.

It was indeed a piano that met his doubtful gaze; a vast and costly instrument, stained with the rains of the afternoon and defaced

with recent scratches. The light of the vesta was reflected from the varnished sides, like a staine in quiet water; and in the farther end of the room the shadow of that strange visitor loomed bulkily and wavered on the wall.

Gideon let the match burn to his fingers, and the darkness closed once more on his bewilderment. Then with trembling hands he lit the lamp and drew near. Near or far, there was no doubt of the fact: the thing was a piano. There, where by all the laws of God and man it was impossible that it should be--there the thing impudently stood. Gideon threw open the keyboard and struck a chord. Not a sound disturbed the quiet of the room. 'Is there anything wrong with me?' he thought, with a pang; and drawing in a seat, obstinately persisted in his attempts to ravish silence, now with sparkling arpeggios, now with a sonata of Beethoven's which (in happier days) he knew to be one of the loudest pieces of that powerful composer. Still not a sound. He gave the Broadwood two great bangs with his clenched fist. All was still as the grave. The young barrister started to his feet.

'I am stark-staring mad,' he cried aloud, 'and no one knows it but myself. God's worst curse has fallen on me.'

His fingers encountered his watch-chain; instantly he had plucked forth his watch and held it to his ear. He could hear it ticking.

'I am not deaf,' he said aloud. 'I am only insane. My mind has quitted

me for ever.'

He looked uneasily about the room, and--gazed with lacklustre eyes at the chair in which Mr Dickson had installed himself. The end of a cigar lay near on the fender.

'No,' he thought, 'I don't believe that was a dream; but God knows my mind is failing rapidly. I seem to be hungry, for instance; it's probably another hallucination. Still I might try. I shall have one more good meal; I shall go to the Cafe Royal, and may possibly be removed from there direct to the asylum.'

He wondered with morbid interest, as he descended the stairs, how he would first betray his terrible condition--would he attack a waiter? or eat glass?--and when he had mounted into a cab, he bade the man drive to Nichol's, with a lurking fear that there was no such place.

The flaring, gassy entrance of the cafe speedily set his mind at rest; he was cheered besides to recognize his favourite waiter; his orders appeared to be coherent; the dinner, when it came, was quite a sensible meal, and he ate it with enjoyment. 'Upon my word,' he reflected, 'I am about tempted to indulge a hope. Have I been hasty? Have I done what Robert Skill would have done?' Robert Skill (I need scarcely mention) was the name of the principal character in *Who Put Back the Clock*? It had occurred to the author as a brilliant and probable invention; to readers of a critical turn, Robert appeared scarce upon a level with his

surname; but it is the difficulty of the police romance, that the reader is always a man of such vastly greater ingenuity than the writer. In the eyes of his creator, however, Robert Skill was a word to conjure with; the thought braced and spurred him; what that brilliant creature would have done Gideon would do also. This frame of mind is not uncommon; the distressed general, the baited divine, the hesitating author, decide severally to do what Napoleon, what St Paul, what Shakespeare would have done; and there remains only the minor question, What is that? In Gideon's case one thing was clear: Skill was a man of singular decision, he would have taken some step (whatever it was) at once; and the only step that Gideon could think of was to return to his chambers.

This being achieved, all further inspiration failed him, and he stood pitifully staring at the instrument of his confusion. To touch the keys again was more than he durst venture on; whether they had maintained their former silence, or responded with the tones of the last trump, it would have equally dethroned his resolution. 'It may be a practical jest,' he reflected, 'though it seems elaborate and costly. And yet what else can it be? It MUST be a practical jest.' And just then his eye fell upon a feature which seemed corroborative of that view: the pagoda of cigars which Michael had erected ere he left the chambers. 'Why that?' reflected Gideon. 'It seems entirely irresponsible.' And drawing near, he gingerly demolished it. 'A key,' he thought. 'Why that? And why so conspicuously placed?' He made the circuit of the instrument, and perceived the keyhole at the back. 'Aha! this is what the key is for,' said he. 'They wanted me to look inside. Stranger and stranger.' And

with that he turned the key and raised the lid.

In what antics of agony, in what fits of flighty resolution, in what collapses of despair, Gideon consumed the night, it would be ungenerous to enquire too closely.

That trill of tiny song with which the eaves-birds of London welcome the approach of day found him limp and rumped and bloodshot, and with a mind still vacant of resource. He rose and looked forth unrejoicingly on blinded windows, an empty street, and the grey daylight dotted with the yellow lamps. There are mornings when the city seems to awake with a sick headache; this was one of them; and still the twittering reveille of the sparrows stirred in Gideon's spirit.

'Day here,' he thought, 'and I still helpless! This must come to an end.' And he locked up the piano, put the key in his pocket, and set forth in quest of coffee. As he went, his mind trudged for the hundredth time a certain mill-road of terrors, misgivings, and regrets. To call in the police, to give up the body, to cover London with handbills describing John Dickson and Ezra Thomas, to fill the papers with paragraphs, Mysterious Occurrence in the Temple--Mr Forsyth admitted to bail, this was one course, an easy course, a safe course; but not, the more he reflected on it, not a pleasant one. For, was it not to publish abroad a number of singular facts about himself? A child ought to have seen through the story of these adventurers, and he had gaped and swallowed it. A barrister of the least self-respect should have refused

to listen to clients who came before him in a manner so irregular, and he had listened. And O, if he had only listened; but he had gone upon their errand--he, a barrister, uninstructed even by the shadow of a solicitor--upon an errand fit only for a private detective; and alas!--and for the hundredth time the blood surged to his brow--he had taken their money! 'No,' said he, 'the thing is as plain as St Paul's. I shall be dishonoured! I have smashed my career for a five-pound note.'

Between the possibility of being hanged in all innocence, and the certainty of a public and merited disgrace, no gentleman of spirit could long hesitate. After three gulps of that hot, snuffy, and muddy beverage, that passes on the streets of London for a decoction of the coffee berry, Gideon's mind was made up. He would do without the police. He must face the other side of the dilemma, and be Robert Skill in earnest. What would Robert Skill have done? How does a gentleman dispose of a dead body, honestly come by? He remembered the inimitable story of the hunchback; reviewed its course, and dismissed it for a worthless guide. It was impossible to prop a corpse on the corner of Tottenham Court Road without arousing fatal curiosity in the bosoms of the passers-by; as for lowering it down a London chimney, the physical obstacles were insurmountable. To get it on board a train and drop it out, or on the top of an omnibus and drop it off, were equally out of the question. To get it on a yacht and drop it overboard, was more conceivable; but for a man of moderate means it seemed extravagant. The hire of the yacht was in itself a consideration; the subsequent support of the whole crew (which seemed a necessary consequence) was simply

not to be thought of. His uncle and the houseboat here occurred in very luminous colours to his mind. A musical composer (say, of the name of Jimson) might very well suffer, like Hogarth's musician before him, from the disturbances of London. He might very well be pressed for time to finish an opera--say the comic opera Orange Pekoe--Orange Pekoe, music by Jimson--'this young maestro, one of the most promising of our recent English school'--vigorous entrance of the drums, etc.--the whole character of Jimson and his music arose in bulk before the mind of Gideon. What more likely than Jimson's arrival with a grand piano (say, at Padwick), and his residence in a houseboat alone with the unfinished score of Orange Pekoe? His subsequent disappearance, leaving nothing behind but an empty piano case, it might be more difficult to account for. And yet even that was susceptible of explanation. For, suppose Jimson had gone mad over a fugal passage, and had thereupon destroyed the accomplice of his infamy, and plunged into the welcome river? What end, on the whole, more probable for a modern musician?

'By Jove, I'll do it,' cried Gideon. 'Jimson is the boy!'