

## CHAPTER XI. The Maestro Jimson

Mr Edward Hugh Bloomfield having announced his intention to stay in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead, what more probable than that the Maestro Jimson should turn his mind toward Padwick? Near this pleasant riverside village he remembered to have observed an ancient, weedy houseboat lying moored beside a tuft of willows. It had stirred in him, in his careless hours, as he pulled down the river under a more familiar name, a certain sense of the romantic; and when the nice contrivance of his story was already complete in his mind, he had come near pulling it all down again, like an ungrateful clock, in order to introduce a chapter in which Richard Skill (who was always being decoyed somewhere) should be decoyed on board that lonely hulk by Lord Bellew and the American desperado Gin Sling. It was fortunate he had not done so, he reflected, since the hulk was now required for very different purposes.

Jimson, a man of inconspicuous costume, but insinuating manners, had little difficulty in finding the hireling who had charge of the houseboat, and still less in persuading him to resign his care. The rent was almost nominal, the entry immediate, the key was exchanged against a suitable advance in money, and Jimson returned to town by the afternoon train to see about dispatching his piano.

'I will be down tomorrow,' he had said reassuringly. 'My opera is waited for with such impatience, you know.'

And, sure enough, about the hour of noon on the following day, Jimson might have been observed ascending the riverside road that goes from Padwick to Great Haverham, carrying in one hand a basket of provisions, and under the other arm a leather case containing (it is to be conjectured) the score of Orange Pekoe. It was October weather; the stone-grey sky was full of larks, the leaden mirror of the Thames brightened with autumnal foliage, and the fallen leaves of the chestnuts chirped under the composer's footing. There is no time of the year in England more courageous; and Jimson, though he was not without his troubles, whistled as he went.

A little above Padwick the river lies very solitary. On the opposite shore the trees of a private park enclose the view, the chimneys of the mansion just pricking forth above their clusters; on the near side the path is bordered by willows. Close among these lay the houseboat, a thing so soiled by the tears of the overhanging willows, so grown upon with parasites, so decayed, so battered, so neglected, such a haunt of rats, so advertised a storehouse of rheumatic agonies, that the heart of an intending occupant might well recoil. A plank, by way of flying drawbridge, joined it to the shore. And it was a dreary moment for Jimson when he pulled this after him and found himself alone on this unwholesome fortress. He could hear the rats scuttle and flop in the abhorred interior; the key cried among the wards like a thing in pain; the sitting-room was deep in dust, and smelt strong of bilge-water. It could not be called a cheerful spot, even for a composer absorbed in beloved toil; how much less for a young gentleman haunted by alarms and

awaiting the arrival of a corpse!

He sat down, cleared away a piece of the table, and attacked the cold luncheon in his basket. In case of any subsequent inquiry into the fate of Jimson, it was desirable he should be little seen: in other words, that he should spend the day entirely in the house. To this end, and further to corroborate his fable, he had brought in the leather case not only writing materials, but a ream of large-size music paper, such as he considered suitable for an ambitious character like Jimson's. 'And now to work,' said he, when he had satisfied his appetite. 'We must leave traces of the wretched man's activity.' And he wrote in bold characters:

ORANGE PEKOE.

Op. 17.

J. B. JIMSON.

Vocal and p. f. score.

'I suppose they never do begin like this,' reflected Gideon; 'but then it's quite out of the question for me to tackle a full score, and Jimson was so unconventional. A dedication would be found convincing, I believe. "Dedicated to" (let me see) "to William Ewart Gladstone, by his obedient servant the composer." And now some music: I had better avoid the overture; it seems to present difficulties. Let's give an air for the tenor: key--O, something modern!--seven sharps.' And he made a businesslike signature across the staves, and then paused and browsed for a while on the handle of his pen. Melody, with no better inspiration

than a sheet of paper, is not usually found to spring unbidden in the mind of the amateur; nor is the key of seven sharps a place of much repose to the untried. He cast away that sheet. 'It will help to build up the character of Jimson,' Gideon remarked, and again waited on the muse, in various keys and on divers sheets of paper, but all with results so inconsiderable that he stood aghast. 'It's very odd,' thought he. 'I seem to have less fancy than I thought, or this is an off-day with me; yet Jimson must leave something.' And again he bent himself to the task.

Presently the penetrating chill of the houseboat began to attack the very seat of life. He desisted from his unremunerative trial, and, to the audible annoyance of the rats, walked briskly up and down the cabin. Still he was cold. 'This is all nonsense,' said he. 'I don't care about the risk, but I will not catch a catarrh. I must get out of this den.'

He stepped on deck, and passing to the bow of his embarkation, looked for the first time up the river. He started. Only a few hundred yards above another houseboat lay moored among the willows. It was very spick-and-span, an elegant canoe hung at the stern, the windows were concealed by snowy curtains, a flag floated from a staff. The more Gideon looked at it, the more there mingled with his disgust a sense of impotent surprise. It was very like his uncle's houseboat; it was exceedingly like--it was identical. But for two circumstances, he could have sworn it was the same. The first, that his uncle had gone to Maidenhead, might be explained away by that flightiness of purpose which

is so common a trait among the more than usually manly. The second, however, was conclusive: it was not in the least like Mr Bloomfield to display a banner on his floating residence; and if he ever did, it would certainly be dyed in hues of emblematical propriety. Now the Squirradical, like the vast majority of the more manly, had drawn knowledge at the wells of Cambridge--he was wooden spoon in the year 1850; and the flag upon the houseboat streamed on the afternoon air with the colours of that seat of Toryism, that cradle of Puseyism, that home of the inexact and the effete Oxford. Still it was strangely like, thought Gideon.

And as he thus looked and thought, the door opened, and a young lady stepped forth on deck. The barrister dropped and fled into his cabin--it was Julia Hazeltine! Through the window he watched her draw in the canoe, get on board of it, cast off, and come dropping downstream in his direction.

'Well, all is up now,' said he, and he fell on a seat.

'Good-afternoon, miss,' said a voice on the water. Gideon knew it for the voice of his landlord.

'Good-afternoon,' replied Julia, 'but I don't know who you are; do I? O yes, I do though. You are the nice man that gave us leave to sketch from the old houseboat.'

Gideon's heart leaped with fear.

'That's it,' returned the man. 'And what I wanted to say was as you couldn't do it any more. You see I've let it.'

'Let it!' cried Julia.

'Let it for a month,' said the man. 'Seems strange, don't it? Can't see what the party wants with it?'

'It seems very romantic of him, I think,' said Julia, 'What sort of a person is he?'

Julia in her canoe, the landlord in his wherry, were close alongside, and holding on by the gunwale of the houseboat; so that not a word was lost on Gideon.

'He's a music-man,' said the landlord, 'or at least that's what he told me, miss; come down here to write an op'ra.'

'Really!' cried Julia, 'I never heard of anything so delightful! Why, we shall be able to slip down at night and hear him improvise! What' is his name?'

'Jimson,' said the man.

'Jimson?' repeated Julia, and interrogated her memory in vain. But indeed our rising school of English music boasts so many professors that we rarely hear of one till he is made a baronet. 'Are you sure you have it right?'

'Made him spell it to me,' replied the landlord. 'J-I-M-S-O-N--Jimson; and his op'ra's called--some kind of tea.'

'SOME KIND OF TEA!' cried the girl. 'What a very singular name for an opera! What can it be about?' And Gideon heard her pretty laughter flow abroad. 'We must try to get acquainted with this Mr Jimson; I feel sure he must be nice.'

'Well, miss, I'm afraid I must be going on. I've got to be at Haverham, you see.'

'O, don't let me keep you, you kind man!' said Julia. 'Good afternoon.'

'Good afternoon to you, miss.'

Gideon sat in the cabin a prey to the most harrowing thoughts. Here he was anchored to a rotting houseboat, soon to be anchored to it still more emphatically by the presence of the corpse, and here was the country buzzing about him, and young ladies already proposing pleasure parties to surround his house at night. Well, that meant the gallows; and much he cared for that. What troubled him now was Julia's

indescribable levity. That girl would scrape acquaintance with anybody; she had no reserve, none of the enamel of the lady. She was familiar with a brute like his landlord; she took an immediate interest (which she lacked even the delicacy to conceal) in a creature like Jimson! He could conceive her asking Jimson to have tea with her! And it was for a girl like this that a man like Gideon--Down, manly heart!

He was interrupted by a sound that sent him whipping behind the door in a trice. Miss Hazeltine had stepped on board the houseboat. Her sketch was promising; judging from the stillness, she supposed Jimson not yet come; and she had decided to seize occasion and complete the work of art. Down she sat therefore in the bow, produced her block and water-colours, and was soon singing over (what used to be called) the ladylike accomplishment. Now and then indeed her song was interrupted, as she searched in her memory for some of the odious little receipts by means of which the game is practised--or used to be practised in the brave days of old; they say the world, and those ornaments of the world, young ladies, are become more sophisticated now; but Julia had probably studied under Pitman, and she stood firm in the old ways.

Gideon, meanwhile, stood behind the door, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, afraid to think of what must follow, racked by confinement and borne to the ground with tedium. This particular phase, he felt with gratitude, could not last for ever; whatever impended (even the gallows, he bitterly and perhaps erroneously reflected) could not fail to be a relief. To calculate cubes occurred to him as an ingenious and even



profitable refuge from distressing thoughts, and he threw his manhood into that dreary exercise.

Thus, then, were these two young persons occupied--Gideon attacking the perfect number with resolution; Julia vigorously stippling incongruous colours on her block, when Providence dispatched into these waters a steam-launch asthmatically panting up the Thames. All along the banks the water swelled and fell, and the reeds rustled. The houseboat itself, that ancient stationary creature, became suddenly imbued with life, and rolled briskly at her moorings, like a sea-going ship when she begins to smell the harbour bar. The wash had nearly died away, and the quick panting of the launch sounded already faint and far off, when Gideon was startled by a cry from Julia. Peering through the window, he beheld her staring disconsolately downstream at the fast-vanishing canoe. The barrister (whatever were his faults) displayed on this occasion a promptitude worthy of his hero, Robert Skill; with one effort of his mind he foresaw what was about to follow; with one movement of his body he dropped to the floor and crawled under the table.

Julia, on her part, was not yet alive to her position. She saw she had lost the canoe, and she looked forward with something less than avidity to her next interview with Mr Bloomfield; but she had no idea that she was imprisoned, for she knew of the plank bridge.

She made the circuit of the house, and found the door open and the bridge withdrawn. It was plain, then, that Jimson must have come;

plain, too, that he must be on board. He must be a very shy man to have suffered this invasion of his residence, and made no sign; and her courage rose higher at the thought. He must come now, she must force him from his privacy, for the plank was too heavy for her single strength; so she tapped upon the open door. Then she tapped again.

'Mr Jimson,' she cried, 'Mr Jimson! here, come!--you must come, you know, sooner or later, for I can't get off without you. O, don't be so exceedingly silly! O, please, come!'

Still there was no reply.

'If he is here he must be mad,' she thought, with a little fear. And the next moment she remembered he had probably gone aboard like herself in a boat. In that case she might as well see the houseboat, and she pushed open the door and stepped in. Under the table, where he lay smothered with dust, Gideon's heart stood still.

There were the remains of Jimson's lunch. 'He likes rather nice things to eat,' she thought. 'O, I am sure he is quite a delightful man. I wonder if he is as good-looking as Mr Forsyth. Mrs Jimson--I don't believe it sounds as nice as Mrs Forsyth; but then "Gideon" is so really odious! And here is some of his music too; this is delightful. Orange Pekoe--O, that's what he meant by some kind of tea.' And she trilled with laughter. 'Adagio molto espressivo, sempre legato,' she read next. (For the literary part of a composer's business Gideon was well

equipped.) 'How very strange to have all these directions, and only three or four notes! O, here's another with some more. Andante patetico.' And she began to glance over the music. 'O dear me,' she thought, 'he must be terribly modern! It all seems discords to me. Let's try the air. It is very strange, it seems familiar.' She began to sing it, and suddenly broke off with laughter. 'Why, it's "Tommy make room for your Uncle!"' she cried aloud, so that the soul of Gideon was filled with bitterness. 'Andante patetico, indeed! The man must be a mere impostor.'

And just at this moment there came a confused, scuffling sound from underneath the table; a strange note, like that of a barn-door fowl, ushered in a most explosive sneeze; the head of the sufferer was at the same time brought smartly in contact with the boards above; and the sneeze was followed by a hollow groan.

Julia fled to the door, and there, with the salutary instinct of the brave, turned and faced the danger. There was no pursuit. The sounds continued; below the table a crouching figure was indistinctly to be seen jostled by the throes of a sneezing-fit; and that was all.

'Surely,' thought Julia, 'this is most unusual behaviour. He cannot be a man of the world!'

Meanwhile the dust of years had been disturbed by the young barrister's convulsions; and the sneezing-fit was succeeded by a passionate access

of coughing.

Julia began to feel a certain interest. 'I am afraid you are really quite ill,' she said, drawing a little nearer. 'Please don't let me put you out, and do not stay under that table, Mr Jimson. Indeed it cannot be good for you.'

Mr Jimson only answered by a distressing cough; and the next moment the girl was on her knees, and their faces had almost knocked together under the table.

'O, my gracious goodness!' exclaimed Miss Hazeltine, and sprang to her feet. 'Mr Forsyth gone mad!'

'I am not mad,' said the gentleman ruefully, extricating himself from his position. 'Dearest. Miss Hazeltine, I vow to you upon my knees I am not mad!'

'You are not!' she cried, panting.

'I know,' he said, 'that to a superficial eye my conduct may appear unconventional.'

'If you are not mad, it was no conduct at all,' cried the girl, with a flash of colour, 'and showed you did not care one penny for my feelings!'

'This is the very devil and all. I know--I admit that,' cried Gideon, with a great effort of manly candour.

'It was abominable conduct!' said Julia, with energy.

'I know it must have shaken your esteem,' said the barrister. 'But, dearest Miss Hazeltine, I beg of you to hear me out; my behaviour, strange as it may seem, is not unsusceptible of explanation; and I positively cannot and will not consent to continue to try to exist without--without the esteem of one whom I admire--the moment is ill chosen, I am well aware of that; but I repeat the expression--one whom I admire.'

A touch of amusement appeared on Miss Hazeltine's face. 'Very well, I said she, 'come out of this dreadfully cold place, and let us sit down on deck.' The barrister dolefully followed her. 'Now,' said she, making herself comfortable against the end of the house, 'go on. I will hear you out.' And then, seeing him stand before her with so much obvious disrelish to the task, she was suddenly overcome with laughter. Julia's laugh was a thing to ravish lovers; she rolled her mirthful descant with the freedom and the melody of a blackbird's song upon the river, and repeated by the echoes of the farther bank. It seemed a thing in its own place and a sound native to the open air. There was only one creature who heard it without joy, and that was her unfortunate admirer.

'Miss Hazeltine,' he said, in a voice that tottered with annoyance, 'I speak as your sincere well-wisher, but this can only be called levity.'

Julia made great eyes at him.

'I can't withdraw the word,' he said: 'already the freedom with which I heard you hobnobbing with a boatman gave me exquisite pain. Then there was a want of reserve about Jimson--'

'But Jimson appears to be yourself,' objected Julia.

'I am far from denying that,' cried the barrister, 'but you did not know it at the time. What could Jimson be to you? Who was Jimson? Miss Hazeltine, it cut me to the heart.'

'Really this seems to me to be very silly,' returned Julia, with severe decision. 'You have behaved in the most extraordinary manner; you pretend you are able to explain your conduct, and instead of doing so you begin to attack me.'

'I am well aware of that,' replied Gideon. 'I--I will make a clean breast of it. When you know all the circumstances you will be able to excuse me.'

And sitting down beside her on the deck, he poured forth his miserable history.

'O, Mr Forsyth,' she cried, when he had done, 'I am--so--sorry! wish I hadn't laughed at you--only you know you really were so exceedingly funny. But I wish I hadn't, and I wouldn't either if I had only known.' And she gave him her hand.

Gideon kept it in his own. 'You do not think the worse of me for this?' he asked tenderly.

'Because you have been so silly and got into such dreadful trouble? you poor boy, no!' cried Julia; and, in the warmth of the moment, reached him her other hand; 'you may count on me,' she added.

'Really?' said Gideon.

'Really and really!' replied the girl.

'I do then, and I will,' cried the young man. 'I admit the moment is not well chosen; but I have no friends--to speak of.'

'No more have I,' said Julia. 'But don't you think it's perhaps time you gave me back my hands?'

'La ci darem la mano,' said the barrister, 'the merest moment more! I have so few friends,' he added.

'I thought it was considered such a bad account of a young man to have no friends,' observed Julia.

'O, but I have crowds of FRIENDS!' cried Gideon. 'That's not what I mean. I feel the moment is ill chosen; but O, Julia, if you could only see yourself!'

'Mr Forsyth--'

'Don't call me by that beastly name!' cried the youth. 'Call me Gideon!'

'O, never that,' from Julia. 'Besides, we have known each other such a short time.'

'Not at all!' protested Gideon. 'We met at Bournemouth ever so long ago. I never forgot you since. Say you never forgot me. Say you never forgot me, and call me Gideon!'

'Isn't this rather--a want of reserve about Jimson?' enquired the girl.

'O, I know I am an ass,' cried the barrister, 'and I don't care a halfpenny! I know I'm an ass, and you may laugh at me to your heart's delight.' And as Julia's lips opened with a smile, he once more dropped into music. 'There's the Land of Cherry Isle!' he sang, courting her with his eyes.



'It's like an opera,' said Julia, rather faintly.

'What should it be?' said Gideon. 'Am I not Jimson? It would be strange if I did not serenade my love. O yes, I mean the word, my Julia; and I mean to win you. I am in dreadful trouble, and I have not a penny of my own, and I have cut the silliest figure; and yet I mean to win you, Julia. Look at me, if you can, and tell me no!'

She looked at him; and whatever her eyes may have told him, it is to be supposed he took a pleasure in the message, for he read it a long while.

'And Uncle Ned will give us some money to go on upon in the meanwhile,' he said at last.

'Well, I call that cool!' said a cheerful voice at his elbow.

Gideon and Julia sprang apart with wonderful alacrity; the latter annoyed to observe that although they had never moved since they sat down, they were now quite close together; both presenting faces of a very heightened colour to the eyes of Mr Edward Hugh Bloomfield. That gentleman, coming up the river in his boat, had captured the truant canoe, and divining what had happened, had thought to steal a march upon Miss Hazeltine at her sketch. He had unexpectedly brought down two birds with one stone; and as he looked upon the pair of flushed and breathless culprits, the pleasant human instinct of the matchmaker softened his heart.

'Well, I call that cool,' he repeated; 'you seem to count very securely upon Uncle Ned. But look here, Gid, I thought I had told you to keep away?'

'To keep away from Maidenhead,' replied Gid. 'But how should I expect to find you here?'

'There is something in that,' Mr Bloomfield admitted. 'You see I thought it better that even you should be ignorant of my address; those rascals, the Finsburys, would have wormed it out of you. And just to put them off the scent I hoisted these abominable colours. But that is not all, Gid; you promised me to work, and here I find you playing the fool at Padwick.'

'Please, Mr Bloomfield, you must not be hard on Mr Forsyth,' said Julia. 'Poor boy, he is in dreadful straits.'

'What's this, Gid?' enquired the uncle. 'Have you been fighting? or is it a bill?'

These, in the opinion of the Squirradical, were the two misfortunes incident to gentlemen; and indeed both were culled from his own career. He had once put his name (as a matter of form) on a friend's paper; it had cost him a cool thousand; and the friend had gone about with the fear of death upon him ever since, and never turned a corner without

scouting in front of him for Mr Bloomfield and the oaken staff. As for fighting, the Squirradical was always on the brink of it; and once, when (in the character of president of a Radical club) he had cleared out the hall of his opponents, things had gone even further. Mr Holtum, the Conservative candidate, who lay so long on the bed of sickness, was prepared to swear to Mr Bloomfield. 'I will swear to it in any court--it was the hand of that brute that struck me down,' he was reported to have said; and when he was thought to be sinking, it was known that he had made an ante-mortem statement in that sense. It was a cheerful day for the Squirradical when Holtum was restored to his brewery.

'It's much worse than that,' said Gideon; 'a combination of circumstances really providentially unjust--a--in fact, a syndicate of murderers seem to have perceived my latent ability to rid them of the traces of their crime. It's a legal study after all, you see!' And with these words, Gideon, for the second time that day, began to describe the adventures of the Broadwood Grand.

'I must write to The Times,' cried Mr Bloomfield.

'Do you want to get me disbarred?' asked Gideon.

'Disbarred! Come, it can't be as bad as that,' said his uncle. 'It's a good, honest, Liberal Government that's in, and they would certainly move at my request. Thank God, the days of Tory jobbery are at an end.'

'It wouldn't do, Uncle Ned,' said Gideon.

'But you're not mad enough,' cried Mr Bloomfield, 'to persist in trying to dispose of it yourself?'

'There is no other path open to me,' said Gideon.

'It's not common sense, and I will not hear of it,' cried Mr Bloomfield.

'I command you, positively, Gid, to desist from this criminal interference.'

'Very well, then, I hand it over to you,' said Gideon, 'and you can do what you like with the dead body.'

'God forbid!' ejaculated the president of the Radical Club, 'I'll have nothing to do with it.'

'Then you must allow me to do the best I can,' returned his nephew.

'Believe me, I have a distinct talent for this sort of difficulty.'

'We might forward it to that pest-house, the Conservative Club,' observed Mr Bloomfield. 'It might damage them in the eyes of their constituents; and it could be profitably worked up in the local journal.'

'If you see any political capital in the thing,' said Gideon, 'you may

have it for me.'

'No, no, Gid--no, no, I thought you might. I will have no hand in the thing. On reflection, it's highly undesirable that either I or Miss Hazeltine should linger here. We might be observed,' said the president, looking up and down the river; 'and in my public position the consequences would be painful for the party. And, at any rate, it's dinner-time.'

'What?' cried Gideon, plunging for his watch. 'And so it is! Great heaven, the piano should have been here hours ago!'

Mr Bloomfield was clambering back into his boat; but at these words he paused.

'I saw it arrive myself at the station; I hired a carrier man; he had a round to make, but he was to be here by four at the latest,' cried the barrister. 'No doubt the piano is open, and the body found.'

'You must fly at once,' cried Mr Bloomfield, 'it's the only manly step.'

'But suppose it's all right?' wailed Gideon. 'Suppose the piano comes, and I am not here to receive it? I shall have hanged myself by my cowardice. No, Uncle Ned, enquiries must be made in Padwick; I dare not go, of course; but you may--you could hang about the police office, don't you see?'

'No, Gid--no, my dear nephew,' said Mr Bloomfield, with the voice of one on the rack. 'I regard you with the most sacred affection; and I thank God I am an Englishman--and all that. But not--not the police, Gid.'

'Then you desert me?' said Gideon. 'Say it plainly.'

'Far from it! far from it!' protested Mr Bloomfield. 'I only propose caution. Common sense, Gid, should always be an Englishman's guide.'

'Will you let me speak?' said Julia. 'I think Gideon had better leave this dreadful houseboat, and wait among the willows over there. If the piano comes, then he could step out and take it in; and if the police come, he could slip into our houseboat, and there needn't be any more Jimson at all. He could go to bed, and we could burn his clothes (couldn't we?) in the steam-launch; and then really it seems as if it would be all right. Mr Bloomfield is so respectable, you know, and such a leading character, it would be quite impossible even to fancy that he could be mixed up with it.'

'This young lady has strong common sense,' said the Squirradical.

'O, I don't think I'm at all a fool,' said Julia, with conviction.

'But what if neither of them come?' asked Gideon; 'what shall I do then?'

'Why then,' said she, 'you had better go down to the village after dark; and I can go with you, and then I am sure you could never be suspected; and even if you were, I could tell them it was altogether a mistake.'

'I will not permit that--I will not suffer Miss Hazeltine to go,' cried Mr Bloomfield.

'Why?' asked Julia.

Mr Bloomfield had not the least desire to tell her why, for it was simply a craven fear of being drawn himself into the imbroglio; but with the usual tactics of a man who is ashamed of himself, he took the high hand. 'God forbid, my dear Miss Hazeltine, that I should dictate to a lady on the question of propriety--' he began.

'O, is that all?' interrupted Julia. 'Then we must go all three.'

'Caught!' thought the Squirradical.