

CHAPTER XII. Positively the Last Appearance of the Broadwood Grand

England is supposed to be unmusical; but without dwelling on the patronage extended to the organ-grinder, without seeking to found any argument on the prevalence of the jew's trump, there is surely one instrument that may be said to be national in the fullest acceptance of the word. The herdboy in the broom, already musical in the days of Father Chaucer, startles (and perhaps pains) the lark with this exiguous pipe; and in the hands of the skilled bricklayer,

'The thing becomes a trumpet, whence he blows'

(as a general rule) either 'The British Grenadiers' or 'Cherry Ripe'. The latter air is indeed the shibboleth and diploma piece of the penny whistler; I hazard a guess it was originally composed for this instrument. It is singular enough that a man should be able to gain a livelihood, or even to tide over a period of unemployment, by the display of his proficiency upon the penny whistle; still more so, that the professional should almost invariably confine himself to 'Cherry Ripe'. But indeed, singularities surround the subject, thick like blackberries. Why, for instance, should the pipe be called a penny whistle? I think no one ever bought it for a penny. Why should the alternative name be tin whistle? I am grossly deceived if it be made of tin. Lastly, in what deaf catacomb, in what earless desert, does the beginner pass the excruciating interval of his apprenticeship? We have all heard people learning the piano, the fiddle, and the cornet; but

the young of the penny whistler (like that of the salmon) is occult from observation; he is never heard until proficient; and providence (perhaps alarmed by the works of Mr Mallock) defends human hearing from his first attempts upon the upper octave.

A really noteworthy thing was taking place in a green lane, not far from Padwick. On the bench of a carrier's cart there sat a tow-headed, lanky, modest-looking youth; the reins were on his lap; the whip lay behind him in the interior of the cart; the horse proceeded without guidance or encouragement; the carrier (or the carrier's man), rapt into a higher sphere than that of his daily occupations, his looks dwelling on the skies, devoted himself wholly to a brand-new D penny whistle, whence he diffidently endeavoured to elicit that pleasing melody 'The Ploughboy'. To any observant person who should have chanced to saunter in that lane, the hour would have been thrilling. 'Here at last,' he would have said, 'is the beginner.'

The tow-headed youth (whose name was Harker) had just encored himself for the nineteenth time, when he was struck into the extreme of confusion by the discovery that he was not alone.

'There you have it!' cried a manly voice from the side of the road.

'That's as good as I want to hear. Perhaps a leetle oilier in the run,' the voice suggested, with meditative gusto. 'Give it us again.'

Harker glanced, from the depths of his humiliation, at the speaker. He beheld a powerful, sun-brown, clean-shaven fellow, about forty years of age, striding beside the cart with a non-commissioned military bearing, and (as he strode) spinning in the air a cane. The fellow's clothes were very bad, but he looked clean and self-reliant.

'I'm only a beginner,' gasped the blushing Harker, 'I didn't think anybody could hear me.'

'Well, I like that!' returned the other. 'You're a pretty old beginner. Come, I'll give you a lead myself. Give us a seat here beside you.'

The next moment the military gentleman was perched on the cart, pipe in hand. He gave the instrument a knowing rattle on the shaft, mouthed it, appeared to commune for a moment with the muse, and dashed into 'The girl I left behind me'. He was a great, rather than a fine, performer; he lacked the bird-like richness; he could scarce have extracted all the honey out of 'Cherry Ripe'; he did not fear--he even ostentatiously displayed and seemed to revel in the shrillness of the instrument; but in fire, speed, precision, evenness, and fluency; in linked agility of jimmy--a technical expression, by your leave, answering to warblers on the bagpipe; and perhaps, above all, in that inspiring side-glance of the eye, with which he followed the effect and (as by a human appeal) eked out the insufficiency of his performance: in these, the fellow stood without a rival. Harker listened: 'The girl I left behind me' filled him with despair; 'The Soldier's Joy' carried him beyond jealousy

into generous enthusiasm.

'Turn about,' said the military gentleman, offering the pipe.

'O, not after you!' cried Harker; 'you're a professional.'

'No,' said his companion; 'an amatyure like yourself. That's one style of play, yours is the other, and I like it best. But I began when I was a boy, you see, before my taste was formed. When you're my age you'll play that thing like a cornet-a-piston. Give us that air again; how does it go?' and he affected to endeavour to recall 'The Ploughboy'.

A timid, insane hope sprang in the breast of Harker. Was it possible? Was there something in his playing? It had, indeed, seemed to him at times as if he got a kind of a richness out of it. Was he a genius? Meantime the military gentleman stumbled over the air.

'No,' said the unhappy Harker, 'that's not quite it. It goes this way--just to show you.'

And, taking the pipe between his lips, he sealed his doom. When he had played the air, and then a second time, and a third; when the military gentleman had tried it once more, and once more failed; when it became clear to Harker that he, the blushing debutant, was actually giving a lesson to this full-grown flutist--and the flutist under his care was not very brilliantly progressing--how am I to tell what floods of glory

brightened the autumnal countryside; how, unless the reader were an amateur himself, describe the heights of idiotic vanity to which the carrier climbed? One significant fact shall paint the situation: thenceforth it was Harker who played, and the military gentleman listened and approved.

As he listened, however, he did not forget the habit of soldierly precaution, looking both behind and before. He looked behind and computed the value of the carrier's load, divining the contents of the brown-paper parcels and the portly hamper, and briefly setting down the grand piano in the brand-new piano-case as 'difficult to get rid of'. He looked before, and spied at the corner of the green lane a little country public-house embowered in roses. 'I'll have a shy at it,' concluded the military gentleman, and roundly proposed a glass. 'Well, I'm not a drinking man,' said Harker.

'Look here, now,' cut in the other, 'I'll tell you who I am: I'm Colour-Sergeant Brand of the Blankth. That'll tell you if I'm a drinking man or not.' It might and it might not, thus a Greek chorus would have intervened, and gone on to point out how very far it fell short of telling why the sergeant was tramping a country lane in tatters; or even to argue that he must have pretermitted some while ago his labours for the general defence, and (in the interval) possibly turned his attention to oakum. But there was no Greek chorus present; and the man of war went on to contend that drinking was one thing and a friendly glass another.

In the Blue Lion, which was the name of the country public-house, Colour-Sergeant Brand introduced his new friend, Mr Harker, to a number of ingenious mixtures, calculated to prevent the approaches of intoxication. These he explained to be 'rekisite' in the service, so that a self-respecting officer should always appear upon parade in a condition honourable to his corps. The most efficacious of these devices was to lace a pint of mild ale with twopenceworth of London gin. I am pleased to hand in this recipe to the discerning reader, who may find it useful even in civil station; for its effect upon Mr Harker was revolutionary. He must be helped on board his own waggon, where he proceeded to display a spirit entirely given over to mirth and music, alternately hooting with laughter, to which the sergeant hastened to bear chorus, and incoherently tootling on the pipe. The man of war, meantime, unostentatiously possessed himself of the reins. It was plain he had a taste for the secluded beauties of an English landscape; for the cart, although it wandered under his guidance for some time, was never observed to issue on the dusty highway, journeying between hedge and ditch, and for the most part under overhanging boughs. It was plain, besides, he had an eye to the true interests of Mr Harker; for though the cart drew up more than once at the doors of public-houses, it was only the sergeant who set foot to ground, and, being equipped himself with a quart bottle, once more proceeded on his rural drive.

To give any idea of the complexity of the sergeant's course, a map of that part of Middlesex would be required, and my publisher is averse from the expense. Suffice it, that a little after the night had closed,

the cart was brought to a standstill in a woody road; where the sergeant lifted from among the parcels, and tenderly deposited upon the wayside, the inanimate form of Harker.

'If you come-to before daylight,' thought the sergeant, 'I shall be surprised for one.'

From the various pockets of the slumbering carrier he gently collected the sum of seventeen shillings and eightpence sterling; and, getting once more into the cart, drove thoughtfully away.

'If I was exactly sure of where I was, it would be a good job,' he reflected. 'Anyway, here's a corner.'

He turned it, and found himself upon the riverside. A little above him the lights of a houseboat shone cheerfully; and already close at hand, so close that it was impossible to avoid their notice, three persons, a lady and two gentlemen, were deliberately drawing near. The sergeant put his trust in the convenient darkness of the night, and drove on to meet them. One of the gentlemen, who was of a portly figure, walked in the midst of the fairway, and presently held up a staff by way of signal.

'My man, have you seen anything of a carrier's cart?' he cried.

Dark as it was, it seemed to the sergeant as though the slimmer of the two gentlemen had made a motion to prevent the other speaking, and

(finding himself too late) had skipped aside with some alacrity. At another season, Sergeant Brand would have paid more attention to the fact; but he was then immersed in the perils of his own predicament.

'A carrier's cart?' said he, with a perceptible uncertainty of voice.

'No, sir.'

'Ah!' said the portly gentleman, and stood aside to let the sergeant pass. The lady appeared to bend forward and study the cart with every mark of sharpened curiosity, the slimmer gentleman still keeping in the rear.

'I wonder what the devil they would be at,' thought Sergeant Brand; and, looking fearfully back, he saw the trio standing together in the midst of the way, like folk consulting. The bravest of military heroes are not always equal to themselves as to their reputation; and fear, on some singular provocation, will find a lodgment in the most unfamiliar bosom. The word 'detective' might have been heard to gurgle in the sergeant's throat; and vigorously applying the whip, he fled up the riverside road to Great Haverham, at the gallop of the carrier's horse. The lights of the houseboat flashed upon the flying waggon as it passed; the beat of hoofs and the rattle of the vehicle gradually coalesced and died away; and presently, to the trio on the riverside, silence had redescended.

'It's the most extraordinary thing,' cried the slimmer of the two gentlemen, 'but that's the cart.'

'And I know I saw a piano,' said the girl.

'O, it's the cart, certainly; and the extraordinary thing is, it's not the man,' added the first.

'It must be the man, Gid, it must be,' said the portly one.

'Well, then, why is he running away?' asked Gideon.

'His horse bolted, I suppose,' said the Squirradical.

'Nonsense! I heard the whip going like a flail,' said Gideon. 'It simply defies the human reason.'

'I'll tell you,' broke in the girl, 'he came round that corner. Suppose we went and--what do you call it in books?--followed his trail? There may be a house there, or somebody who saw him, or something.'

'Well, suppose we did, for the fun of the thing,' said Gideon.

The fun of the thing (it would appear) consisted in the extremely close juxtaposition of himself and Miss Hazeltine. To Uncle Ned, who was excluded from these simple pleasures, the excursion appeared hopeless from the first; and when a fresh perspective of darkness opened up, dimly contained between park palings on the one side and a hedge and

ditch upon the other, the whole without the smallest signal of human habitation, the Squirradical drew up.

'This is a wild-goose chase,' said he.

With the cessation of the footfalls, another sound smote upon their ears.

'O, what's that?' cried Julia.

'I can't think,' said Gideon.

The Squirradical had his stick presented like a sword. 'Gid,' he began, 'Gid, I--'

'O Mr Forsyth!' cried the girl. 'O don't go forward, you don't know what it might be--it might be something perfectly horrid.'

'It may be the devil itself,' said Gideon, disengaging himself, 'but I am going to see it.'

'Don't be rash, Gid,' cried his uncle.

The barrister drew near to the sound, which was certainly of a portentous character. In quality it appeared to blend the strains of the cow, the fog-horn, and the mosquito; and the startling manner of its

enunciation added incalculably to its terrors. A dark object, not unlike the human form divine, appeared on the brink of the ditch.

'It's a man,' said Gideon, 'it's only a man; he seems to be asleep and snoring. Hullo,' he added, a moment after, 'there must be something wrong with him, he won't waken.'

Gideon produced his vestas, struck one, and by its light recognized the tow head of Harker.

'This is the man,' said he, 'as drunk as Belial. I see the whole story'; and to his two companions, who had now ventured to rejoin him, he set forth a theory of the divorce between the carrier and his cart, which was not unlike the truth.

'Drunken brute!' said Uncle Ned, 'let's get him to a pump and give him what he deserves.'

'Not at all!' said Gideon. 'It is highly undesirable he should see us together; and really, do you know, I am very much obliged to him, for this is about the luckiest thing that could have possibly occurred. It seems to me--Uncle Ned, I declare to heaven it seems to me--I'm clear of it!'

'Clear of what?' asked the Squirradical.

'The whole affair!' cried Gideon. 'That man has been ass enough to steal the cart and the dead body; what he hopes to do with it I neither know nor care. My hands are free, Jimson ceases; down with Jimson. Shake hands with me, Uncle Ned--Julia, darling girl, Julia, I--'

'Gideon, Gideon!' said his uncle. 'O, it's all right, uncle, when we're going to be married so soon,' said Gideon. 'You know you said so yourself in the houseboat.'

'Did I?' said Uncle Ned; 'I am certain I said no such thing.'

'Appeal to him, tell him he did, get on his soft side,' cried Gideon.

'He's a real brick if you get on his soft side.'

'Dear Mr Bloomfield,' said Julia, 'I know Gideon will be such a very good boy, and he has promised me to do such a lot of law, and I will see that he does too. And you know it is so very steadying to young men, everybody admits that; though, of course, I know I have no money, Mr Bloomfield,' she added.

'My dear young lady, as this rascal told you today on the boat, Uncle Ned has plenty,' said the Squirradical, 'and I can never forget that you have been shamefully defrauded. So as there's nobody looking, you had better give your Uncle Ned a kiss. There, you rogue,' resumed Mr Bloomfield, when the ceremony had been daintily performed, 'this very pretty young lady is yours, and a vast deal more than you deserve. But

now, let us get back to the houseboat, get up steam on the launch, and away back to town.'

'That's the thing!' cried Gideon; 'and tomorrow there will be no houseboat, and no Jimson, and no carrier's cart, and no piano; and when Harker awakes on the ditchside, he may tell himself the whole affair has been a dream.'

'Aha!' said Uncle Ned, 'but there's another man who will have a different awakening. That fellow in the cart will find he has been too clever by half.'

'Uncle Ned and Julia,' said Gideon, 'I am as happy as the King of Tartary, my heart is like a threepenny-bit, my heels are like feathers; I am out of all my troubles, Julia's hand is in mine. Is this a time for anything but handsome sentiments? Why, there's not room in me for anything that's not angelic! And when I think of that poor unhappy devil in the cart, I stand here in the night and cry with a single heart God help him!'

'Amen,' said Uncle Ned.