

THE ANGEL'S DEBUT.

XXXIV.

When Lady Hammergeallow made up her mind, things happened as she resolved. And though the Vicar made a spasmodic protest, she carried out her purpose and got audience, Angel, and violin together, at Siddermorton House before the week was out. "A genius the Vicar has discovered," she said; so with eminent foresight putting any possibility of blame for a failure on the Vicar's shoulders. "The dear Vicar tells me," she would say, and proceed to marvellous anecdotes of the Angel's cleverness with his instrument. But she was quite in love with her idea--she had always had a secret desire to play the patroness to obscure talent. Hitherto it had not turned out to be talent when it came to the test.

"It would be such a good thing for him," she said. "His hair is long already, and with that high colour he would be beautiful, simply beautiful on a platform. The Vicar's clothes fitting him so badly makes him look quite like a fashionable pianist already. And the scandal of his birth--not told, of course, but whispered--would be--quite an Inducement----when he gets to London, that is."

The Vicar had the most horrible sensations as the day approached. He spent hours trying to explain the situation to the Angel, other hours

trying to imagine what people would think, still worse hours trying to anticipate the Angel's behaviour. Hitherto the Angel had always played for his own satisfaction. The Vicar would startle him every now and then by rushing upon him with some new point of etiquette that had just occurred to him. As for instance: "It's very important where you put your hat, you know. Don't put it on a chair, whatever you do. Hold it until you get your tea, you know, and then--let me see--then put it down somewhere, you know." The journey to Siddermorton House was accomplished without misadventure, but at the moment of introduction the Vicar had a spasm of horrible misgivings. He had forgotten to explain introductions. The Angel's naïve amusement was evident, but nothing very terrible happened.

"Rummy looking greaser," said Mr Rathbone Slater, who devoted considerable attention to costume. "Wants grooming. No manners. Grinned when he saw me shaking hands. Did it chic enough, I thought."

One trivial misadventure occurred. When Lady Hammergallow welcomed the Angel she looked at him through her glasses. The apparent size of her eyes startled him. His surprise and his quick attempt to peer over the brims was only too evident. But the Vicar had warned him of the ear trumpet.

The Angel's incapacity to sit on anything but a music stool appeared to excite some interest among the ladies, but led to no remarks. They regarded it perhaps as the affectation of a budding professional. He was

remiss with the teacups and scattered the crumbs of his cake abroad. (You must remember he was quite an amateur at eating.) He crossed his legs. He fumbled over the hat business after vainly trying to catch the Vicar's eye. The eldest Miss Papaver tried to talk to him about continental watering places and cigarettes, and formed a low opinion of his intelligence.

The Angel was surprised by the production of an easel and several books of music, and a little unnerved at first by the sight of Lady Hammergallow sitting with her head on one side, watching him with those magnified eyes through her gilt glasses.

Mrs Jehoram came up to him before he began to play and asked him the Name of the Charming Piece he was playing the other afternoon. The Angel said it had no name, and Mrs Jehoram thought music ought never to have any names and wanted to know who it was by, and when the Angel told her he played it out of his head, she said he must be Quite a Genius and looked open (and indisputably fascinating) admiration at him. The Curate from Iping Hanger (who was professionally a Kelt and who played the piano and talked colour and music with an air of racial superiority) watched him jealously.

The Vicar, who was presently captured and set down next to Lady Hammergallow, kept an anxious eye ever Angelward while she told him particulars of the incomes made by violinists--particulars which, for the most part, she invented as she went along. She had been a little

ruffled by the incident of the glasses, but had decided that it came within the limits of permissible originality.

So figure to yourself the Green Saloon at Siddermorton Park; an Angel thinly disguised in clerical vestments and with a violin in his hands, standing by the grand piano, and a respectable gathering of quiet nice people, nicely dressed, grouped about the room. Anticipatory gabble--one hears scattered fragments of conversation.

"He is incog."; said the very eldest Miss Papaver to Mrs Pirbright.

"Isn't it quaint and delicious. Jessica Jehoram says she saw him at Vienna, but she can't remember the name. The Vicar knows all about him, but he is so close----"

"How hot and uncomfortable the dear Vicar is looking," said Mrs Pirbright. "I've noticed it before when he sits next to Lady Hammergallow. She simply will not respect his cloth. She goes on----"

"His tie is all askew," said the very eldest Miss Papaver, "and his hair! It really hardly looks as though he had brushed it all day."

"Seems a foreign sort of chap. Affected. All very well in a drawing-room," said George Harringay, sitting apart with the younger Miss Pirbright. "But for my part give me a masculine man and a feminine woman. What do you think?"

"Oh!--I think so too," said the younger Miss Pirbright.

"Guineas and guineas," said Lady Hammergeallow. "I've heard that some of them keep quite stylish establishments. You would scarcely credit it----"

"I love music, Mr Angel, I adore it. It stirs something in me. I can scarcely describe it," said Mrs Jehoram. "Who is it says that delicious antithesis: Life without music is brutality; music without life is---- Dear me! perhaps you remember? Music without life----it's Ruskin I think?"

"I'm sorry that I do not," said the Angel. "I have read very few books."

"How charming of you!" said Mrs Jehoram. "I wish I didn't. I sympathise with you profoundly. I would do the same, only we poor women----I suppose it's originality we lack---- And down here one is driven to the most desperate proceedings----"

"He's certainly very pretty. But the ultimate test of a man is his strength," said George Harringay. "What do you think?"

"Oh!--I think so too," said the younger Miss Pirbright.

"It's the effeminate man who makes the masculine woman. When the glory of a man is his hair, what's a woman to do? And when men go running

about with beautiful hectic dabs----"

"Oh George! You are so dreadfully satirical to-day," said the younger Miss Pirbright. "I'm sure it isn't paint."

"I'm really not his guardian, my dear Lady Hammergallow. Of course it's very kind indeed of you to take such an interest----"

"Are you really going to improvise?" said Mrs Jehoram in a state of cooing delight.

"SSsh!" said the curate from Iping Hanger.

Then the Angel began to play, looking straight before him as he did so, thinking of the wonderful things of the Angelic Land, and yet insensibly letting the sadness he was beginning to feel, steal over the fantasia he was playing. When he forgot his company the music was strange and sweet; when the sense of his surroundings floated into his mind the music grew capricious and grotesque. But so great was the hold of the Angelic music upon the Vicar that his anxieties fell from him at once, so soon as the Angel began to play. Mrs Jehoram sat and looked rapt and sympathetic as hard as she could (though the music was puzzling at times) and tried to catch the Angel's eye. He really had a wonderfully mobile face, and the tenderest shades of expression! And Mrs Jehoram was a judge. George Harringay looked bored, until the younger Miss Pirbright, who adored him, put out her mousy little shoe to touch his manly boot, and then he

turned his face to catch the feminine delicacy of her coquettish eye, and was comforted. The very eldest Miss Papaver and Mrs Pirbright sat quite still and looked churchy for nearly four minutes.

Then said the eldest Miss Papaver in a whisper, "I always Enjoy violin music so much." And Mrs Pirbright answered, "We get so little Nice music down here." And Miss Papaver said, "He plays Very nicely." And Mrs Pirbright, "Such a Delicate Touch!" And Miss Papaver, "Does Willie keep up his lessons?" and so to a whispered conversation.

The Curate from Iping Hanger sat (he felt) in full view of the company. He had one hand curled round his ear, and his eyes hard and staring fixedly at the pedestal of the Hammergallow Sèvres vase. He supplied, by the movements of his mouth, a kind of critical guide to any of the company who were disposed to avail themselves of it. It was a generous way he had. His aspect was severely judicial, tempered by starts of evident disapproval and guarded appreciation. The Vicar leaned back in his chair and stared at the Angel's face, and was presently rapt away in a wonderful dream. Lady Hammergallow, with quick jerky movements of the head and a low but insistent rustling, surveyed and tried to judge of the effect of the Angelic playing. Mr Rathbone-Slater stared very solemnly into his hat and looked very miserable, and Mrs Rathbone-Slater made mental memoranda of Mrs Jehoram's sleeves. And the air about them all was heavy with exquisite music--for all that had ears to hear.

"Scarcely affected enough," whispered Lady Hammergallow hoarsely,

suddenly poking the Vicar in the ribs. The Vicar came out of Dreamland suddenly. "Eigh?" shouted the Vicar, startled, coming up with a jump. "Sssh!" said the Curate from Iping Hanger, and everyone looked shocked at the brutal insensibility of Hilyer. "So unusual of the Vicar," said the very eldest Miss Papaver, "to do things like that!" The Angel went on playing.

The Curate from Iping Hanger began making mesmeric movements with his index finger, and as the thing proceeded Mr Rathbone-Slater got amazingly limp. He solemnly turned his hat round and altered his view. The Vicar lapsed from an uneasy discomfort into dreamland again. Lady Hammergallow rustled a great deal, and presently found a way of making her chair creak. And at last the thing came to an end. Lady Hammergallow exclaimed "De--licious!" though she had never heard a note, and began clapping her hands. At that everyone clapped except Mr Rathbone-Slater, who rapped his hat brim instead. The Curate from Iping Hanger clapped with a judicial air.

"So I said (clap, clap, clap), if you cannot cook the food my way (clap, clap, clap) you must go," said Mrs Pirbright, clapping vigorously. "(This music is a delightful treat.)"

"(It is. I always revel in music,)" said the very eldest Miss Papaver.

"And did she improve after that?"

"Not a bit of it," said Mrs Pirbright.

The Vicar woke up again and stared round the saloon. Did other people see these visions, or were they confined to him alone? Surely they must all see ... and have a wonderful command of their feelings. It was incredible that such music should not affect them. "He's a trifle gauche," said Lady Hammergallow, jumping upon the Vicar's attention. "He neither bows nor smiles. He must cultivate oddities like that. Every successful executant is more or less gauche."

"Did you really make that up yourself?" said Mrs Jehoram, sparkling her eyes at him, "as you went along. Really, it is wonderful! Nothing less than wonderful."

"A little amateurish," said the Curate from Iping Hanger to Mr Rathbone-Slater. "A great gift, undoubtedly, but a certain lack of sustained training. There were one or two little things ... I would like to talk to him."

"His trousers look like concertinas," said Mr Rathbone-Slater. "He ought to be told that. It's scarcely decent."

"Can you do Imitations, Mr Angel?" said Lady Hammergallow.

"Oh do, do some Imitations!" said Mrs Jehoram. "I adore Imitations."

"It was a fantastic thing," said the Curate of Iping Hanger to the

Vicar of Siddermorton, waving his long indisputably musical hands as he spoke; "a little involved, to my mind. I have heard it before somewhere--I forget where. He has genius undoubtedly, but occasionally he is--loose. There is a certain deadly precision wanting. There are years of discipline yet."

"I don't admire these complicated pieces of music," said George Harringay. "I have simple tastes, I'm afraid. There seems to me no tune in it. There's nothing I like so much as simple music. Tune, simplicity is the need of the age, in my opinion. We are so over subtle. Everything is far-fetched. Home grown thoughts and 'Home, Sweet Home' for me. What do you think?"

"Oh! I think so--quite," said the younger Miss Pirbright.

"Well, Amy, chattering to George as usual?" said Mrs Pirbright, across the room.

"As usual, Ma!" said the younger Miss Pirbright, glancing round with a bright smile at Miss Papaver, and turning again so as not to lose the next utterance from George.

"I wonder if you and Mr Angel could manage a duet?" said Lady Hammergallow to the Curate from Iping Hanger, who was looking preternaturally gloomy.

"I'm sure I should be delighted," said the Curate from Iping Hanger, brightening up.

"Duets!" said the Angel; "the two of us. Then he can play. I understood--the Vicar told me--"

"Mr Wilmerdings is an accomplished pianist," interrupted the Vicar.

"But the Imitations?" said Mrs Jehoram, who detested Wilmerdings.

"Imitations!" said the Angel.

"A pig squeaking, a cock crowing, you know," said Mr Rathbone-Slater, and added lower, "Best fun you can get out of a fiddle--my opinion."

"I really don't understand," said the Angel. "A pig crowing!"

"You don't like Imitations," said Mrs Jehoram. "Nor do I--really. I accept the snub. I think they degrade...."

"Perhaps afterwards Mr Angel will Relent," said Lady Hammergallow, when Mrs Pirbright had explained the matter to her. She could scarcely credit her ear-trumpet. When she asked for Imitations she was accustomed to get Imitations.

Mr Wilmerdings had seated himself at the piano, and had turned to a

familiar pile of music in the recess. "What do you think of that Barcarole thing of Spohr's?" he said over his shoulder. "I suppose you know it?" The Angel looked bewildered.

He opened the folio before the Angel.

"What an odd kind of book!" said the Angel. "What do all those crazy dots mean?" (At that the Vicar's blood ran cold.)

"What dots?" said the Curate.

"There!" said the Angel with incriminating finger.

"Oh come!" said the Curate.

There was one of those swift, short silences that mean so much in a social gathering.

Then the eldest Miss Papaver turned upon the Vicar. "Does not Mr Angel play from ordinary.... Music--from the ordinary notation?"

"I have never heard," said the Vicar, getting red now after the first shock of horror. "I have really never seen...."

The Angel felt the situation was strained, though what was straining it he could not understand. He became aware of a doubtful, an unfriendly

look upon the faces that regarded him. "Impossible!" he heard Mrs Pirbright say; "after that beautiful music." The eldest Miss Papaver went to Lady Hammergeallow at once, and began to explain into her ear-trumpet that Mr Angel did not wish to play with Mr Wilmerdings, and alleged an ignorance of written music.

"He cannot play from Notes!" said Lady Hammergeallow in a voice of measured horror. "Non--sense!"

"Notes!" said the Angel perplexed. "Are these notes?"

"It's carrying the joke too far--simply because he doesn't want to play with Wilmerdings," said Mr Rathbone-Slater to George Harringay.

There was an expectant pause. The Angel perceived he had to be ashamed of himself. He was ashamed of himself.

"Then," said Lady Hammergeallow, throwing her head back and speaking with deliberate indignation, as she rustled forward, "if you cannot play with Mr Wilmerdings I am afraid I cannot ask you to play again." She made it sound like an ultimatum. Her glasses in her hand quivered violently with indignation. The Angel was now human enough to appreciate the fact that he was crushed.

"What is it?" said little Lucy Rustchuck in the further bay.

"He's refused to play with old Wilmerdings," said Tommy Rathbone-Slater.

"What a lark! The old girl's purple. She thinks heaps of that ass, Wilmerdings."

"Perhaps, Mr Wilmerdings, you will favour us with that delicious Polonaise of Chopin's," said Lady Hammergallow. Everybody else was hushed. The indignation of Lady Hammergallow inspired much the same silence as a coming earthquake or an eclipse. Mr Wilmerdings perceived he would be doing a real social service to begin at once, and (be it entered to his credit now that his account draws near its settlement) he did.

"If a man pretend to practise an Art," said George Harringay, "he ought at least to have the conscience to study the elements of it. What do you...."

"Oh! I think so too," said the younger Miss Pirbright.

The Vicar felt that the heavens had fallen. He sat crumpled up in his chair, a shattered man. Lady Hammergallow sat down next to him without appearing to see him. She was breathing heavily, but her face was terribly calm. Everyone sat down. Was the Angel grossly ignorant or only grossly impertinent? The Angel was vaguely aware of some frightful offence, aware that in some mysterious way he had ceased to be the centre of the gathering. He saw reproachful despair in the Vicar's eye. He drifted slowly towards the window in the recess and sat down on the

little octagonal Moorish stool by the side of Mrs Jehoram. And under the circumstances he appreciated at more than its proper value Mrs Jehoram's kindly smile. He put down the violin in the window seat.

XXXV.

Mrs Jehoram and the Angel (apart)--Mr Wilmerdings playing.

"I have so longed for a quiet word with you," said Mrs Jehoram in a low tone. "To tell you how delightful I found your playing."

"I am glad it pleased you," said the Angel.

"Pleased is scarcely the word," said Mrs Jehoram. "I was moved--profoundly. These others did not understand.... I was glad you did not play with him."

The Angel looked at the mechanism called Wilmerdings, and felt glad too. (The Angelic conception of duets is a kind of conversation upon violins.) But he said nothing.

"I worship music," said Mrs Jehoram. "I know nothing about it technically, but there is something in it--a longing, a wish...."

The Angel stared at her face. She met his eyes.

"You understand," she said. "I see you understand." He was certainly a very nice boy, sentimentally precocious perhaps, and with deliciously liquid eyes.

There was an interval of Chopin (Op. 40) played with immense precision.

Mrs Jehoram had a sweet face still, in shadow, with the light falling round her golden hair, and a curious theory flashed across the Angel's mind. The perceptible powder only supported his view of something infinitely bright and lovable caught, tarnished, coarsened, coated over.

"Do you," said the Angel in a low tone. "Are you ... separated from ... your world?"

"As you are?" whispered Mrs Jehoram.

"This is so--cold," said the Angel. "So harsh!" He meant the whole world.

"I feel it too," said Mrs Jehoram, referring to Siddermorton Home.

"There are those who cannot live without sympathy," she said after a sympathetic pause. "And times when one feels alone in the world. Fighting a battle against it all. Laughing, flirting, hiding the pain of it..."

"And hoping," said the Angel with a wonderful glance.--"Yes."

Mrs Jehoram (who was an epicure of flirtations) felt the Angel was more

than redeeming the promise of his appearance. (Indisputably he worshipped her.) "Do you look for sympathy?" she said. "Or have you found it?"

"I think," said the Angel, very softly, leaning forward, "I think I have found it."

Interval of Chopin Op. 40. The very eldest Miss Papaver and Mrs Pirbright whispering. Lady Hammergallow (glasses up) looking down the saloon with an unfriendly expression at the Angel. Mrs Jehoram and the Angel exchanging deep and significant glances.

"Her name," said the Angel (Mrs Jehoram made a movement) "is Delia. She is...."

"Delia!" said Mrs Jehoram sharply, slowly realising a terrible misunderstanding. "A fanciful name.... Why!... No! Not that little housemaid at the Vicarage--?..."

The Polonaise terminated with a flourish. The Angel was quite surprised at the change in Mrs Jehoram's expression.

"I never did!" said Mrs Jehoram recovering. "To make me your confidant in an intrigue with a servant. Really Mr Angel it's possible to be too original...."

Then suddenly their colloquy was interrupted.

XXXVI.

This section is (so far as my memory goes) the shortest in the book.

But the enormity of the offence necessitates the separation of this section from all other sections.

The Vicar, you must understand, had done his best to inculcate the recognised differentiae of a gentleman. "Never allow a lady to carry anything," said the Vicar. "Say, 'permit me' and relieve her." "Always stand until every lady is seated." "Always rise and open a door for a lady...." and so forth. (All men who have elder sisters know that code.)

And the Angel (who had failed to relieve Lady Hammergallow of her teacup) danced forward with astonishing dexterity (leaving Mrs Jehoram in the window seat) and with an elegant "permit me" rescued the tea-tray from Lady Hammergallow's pretty parlour-maid and vanished officiously in front of her. The Vicar rose to his feet with an inarticulate cry.

XXXVII.

"He's drunk!" said Mr Rathbone-Slater, breaking a terrific silence.

"That's the matter with him."

Mrs Jehoram laughed hysterically.

The Vicar stood up, motionless, staring. "Oh! I forgot to explain servants to him!" said the Vicar to himself in a swift outbreak of remorse. "I thought he did understand servants."

"Really, Mr Hilyer!" said Lady Hammergeallow, evidently exercising enormous self-control and speaking in panting spasms. "Really, Mr Hilyer!--Your genius is too terrible. I must, I really must, ask you to take him home."

So to the dialogue in the corridor of alarmed maid-servant and well-meaning (but shockingly gauche) Angel--appears the Vicar, his botryoidal little face crimson, gaunt despair in his eyes, and his necktie under his left ear.

"Come," he said--struggling with emotion. "Come away.... I.... I am disgraced for ever."

And the Angel stared for a second at him and obeyed--meekly, perceiving

himself in the presence of unknown but evidently terrible forces.

And so began and ended the Angel's social career.

In the informal indignation meeting that followed, Lady Hamnergallow took the (informal) chair. "I feel humiliated," she said. "The Vicar assured me he was an exquisite player. I never imagined...."

"He was drunk," said Mr Rathbone-Slater. "You could tell it from the way he fumbled with his tea."

"Such a fiasco!" said Mrs Mergle.

"The Vicar assured me," said Lady Hamnergallow. "'The man I have staying with me is a musical genius,' he said. His very words."

"His ears must be burning anyhow," said Tommy Rathbone-Slater.

"I was trying to keep him Quiet," said Mrs Jehoram. "By humouring him. And do you know the things he said to me--there!"

"The thing he played," said Mr Wilmerdings, "--I must confess I did not like to charge him to his face. But really! It was merely drifting."

"Just fooling with a fiddle, eigh?" said George Harringay. "Well I thought it was beyond me. So much of your fine music is--"

"Oh, George!" said the younger Miss Pirbright.

"The Vicar was a bit on too--to judge by his tie," said Mr Rathbone-Slater. "It's a dashed rummy go. Did you notice how he fussed after the genius?"

"One has to be so very careful," said the very eldest Miss Papaver.

"He told me he is in love with the Vicar's housemaid!" said Mrs Jehoram.

"I almost laughed in his face."

"The Vicar ought never to have brought him here," said Mrs Rathbone-Slater with decision.