



Chapter 12 Fairy-Music

The silence that ensued was broken by the voice of the musical young lady, who had seated herself near us, and was conversing with one of the newly-arrived guests.

“Well!” she said in a tone of scornful surprise. We are to have something new in the way of music, it appears!”

I looked round for an explanation, and was nearly as much astonished as the speaker herself: it was Sylvie whom Lady Muriel was leading to the piano!

“Do try it, my darling!” she was saying. “I’m sure you can play very nicely!”

Sylvie looked round at me, with tears in her eyes. I tried to give her an encouraging smile, but it was evidently a great strain on the nerves of a child so wholly unused to be made an exhibition of, and she was frightened and unhappy. Yet here came out the perfect sweetness of her disposition: I could see that she was resolved to forget herself, and do her best to give pleasure to Lady Muriel and her friends. She seated herself at the instrument, and began instantly. Time and expression, so far as one could judge, were perfect: but her touch was one of such extraordinary lightness that it was at first scarcely possible, through the hum of conversation which still continued, to catch a note of what she was playing.

But in a minute the hum had died away into absolute silence, and we all sat, entranced and breathless, to listen to such heavenly music as none then present could ever forget.

Hardly touching the notes at first, she played a sort of introduction in a minor key--like an embodied twilight; one felt as though the lights were growing dim, and a mist were creeping through the room. Then there flashed through the gathering gloom the first few notes of a melody so lovely, so delicate, that one held one’s breath, fearful to lose a single note of it. Ever and again the music dropped into the pathetic minor key with which it had begun, and, each time that the melody forced its way, so to speak, through the enshrouding gloom into the light of day, it was more entrancing, more magically sweet. Under the airy touch of the child, the instrument actually seemed to warble, like a bird. “Rise up, my love, my fair one,” it seemed to sing, “and come away! For lo the winter is past, the

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rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come!" One could fancy one heard the tinkle of the last few drops, shaken from the trees by a passing gust--that one saw the first glittering rays of the sun, breaking through the clouds.

The Count hurried across the room in great excitement. "I cannot remember myself", he exclaimed, "of the name of this so charming an air! It is of an opera most surely. Yet not even will the opera remind his name to me! What you call him, dear child?"

Sylvie looked round at him with a rapt expression of face. She had ceased playing, but her fingers still wandered fitfully over the keys. All fear and shyness had quite passed away now, and nothing remained but the pure joy of the music that had thrilled our hearts.

"The title of it!" the Count repeated impatiently. "How call you the opera?"

"I don't know what an opera is," Sylvie half-whispered.

"How, then, call you the air?"

"I don't know any, name for it," Sylvie replied, as she rose from the instrument.

"But this is marvellous!" exclaimed the Count, following the child, and addressing himself to me, as if I were the proprietor of this musical prodigy, and so must know the origin of her music. "You have heard her play this, sooner--I would say 'before this occasion'? How call you the air?"

I shook my head: but was saved from more questions by Lady Muriel, who came up to petition the Count for a song.

The Count spread out his hands apologetically, and ducked his head. "But, Milady, I have already respected--I would say prospected--all your songs; and there shall be none fitted to my voice! They are not for basso voices!"

"Wo'n't you look at them again?" Lady Muriel implored.

"Let's help him!" Bruno whispered to Sylvie. "Let's get him--you know!"

Sylvie nodded. "Shall we look for a song for you? she said sweetly to the Count.

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“Mais oui!” the little man exclaimed.

“Of course we may!” said Bruno, while, each taking a hand of the delighted Count, they led him to the music-stand.

“There is still hope!” said Lady Muriel over her shoulder, as she followed them.

I turned to “Mein Herr”, hoping to resume our interrupted conversation. “You were remarking--” I began: but at this moment Sylvie came to call Bruno who had returned to my side, looking unusually serious “Do come, Bruno!” she entreated. “You know we’ve nearly found it!” Then, in a whisper, “The locket’s in my hand, now. I couldn’t get it out while they were looking!”

But Bruno drew back. “The man called me names,” he said with dignity.

“What names?” I enquired with some curiosity.

“I asked him”, said Bruno, “which sort of song he liked. And he said ‘A song of a man, not of a lady’. And I said ‘Shall Sylvie and me find you the song of Mister Tottles And he said ‘Wait, eel!’ And I’m not an eel, oo know!”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it!” Sylvie said earnestly. “It’s something French--you know he ca’n’t talk English so well as--”

Bruno relented visibly. “Course he knows no better, he’s Flench! Flenchmen never can speak English goodly as us!” And Sylvie led him away, a willing captive.

“Nice children!” said the old man, taking off his spectacles and rubbing them carefully. Then he put them on again, and watched with an approving smile, while the children tossed over the heap of music, and we just caught Sylvie’s reproving words, “We’re not making hay, Bruno!”

“This has been a long interruption to our conversation,” I said. “Pray let us go on!”

“Willingly!” replied the gentle old man. “I was much interested in what you--” He paused a moment, and passed his hand uneasily across his brow. “One forgets,” he murmured. “What was I saying? Oh! Something you were to tell me. Yes. Which of your teachers do

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you value the most highly, those whose words are easily understood, or those who puzzle you at every turn?"

I felt obliged to admit that we generally admired most the teachers we couldn't quite understand.

"Just so," said Mein Herr. "That's the way it begins. Well, we were at that stage some eighty years ago--or was it ninety? Our favourite teacher got more obscure every year; and every year we admired him more--just as your Art-fanciers call mist the fairest feature in a landscape, and admire a view with frantic delight when they can see nothing! Now I'll tell you how it ended. It was Moral Philosophy that our idol lectured on. Well, his pupils couldn't make head or tail of it, but they got it all by heart; and, when Examination-time came they wrote it down; and the Examiners said 'Beautiful! What depth!'"

"But what good was it to the young men afterwards?"

"Why, don't you see?" replied Mein Herr. "They became teachers in their turn, and they said all these things over again; and their pupils wrote it all down; and the Examiners accepted it; and nobody had the ghost of an idea what it all meant!"

"And how did it end?"

"It ended this way. We woke up one fine day, and found there was no one in the place that knew anything about Moral Philosophy. So we abolished it, teachers, classes, examiners, and all. And if any one wanted to learn anything about it, he had to make it out for himself, and after another twenty years or so there were several men that really knew something about it! Now tell me another thing. How long do you teach a youth before you examine him, in your Universities?"

I told him three or four years.

"Just so, just what we did!" he exclaimed. "We taught them a bit, and, just as they were beginning to take it in, took it all out again! We pumped our wells dry before they were a quarter full--we stripped our orchards while the apples were still in blossom--we applied the severe logic of arithmetic to our chickens, while peacefully slumbering in their shells! Doubtless it's the early bird that picks up the worm--but if the bird gets up so outrageously early that the worm is still deep underground, what then is its chance of a breakfast?"

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Not much, I admitted.

“Now see how that works!” he went on eagerly. “If you want to pump your wells so soon--and I suppose you tell me that is what you must do?”

“We must,” I said. “In an over-crowded country like this, nothing but Competitive Examinations--”

Mein Herr threw up his hands wildly. “What, again?” he cried. “I thought it was dead, fifty years ago! Oh this Upas tree of Competitive Examinations! Beneath whose deadly shade all the original genius, all the exhaustive research, all the untiring life-long diligence by which our fore-fathers have so advanced human knowledge, must slowly but surely wither away, and give place to a system of Cookery, in which the human mind is a sausage, and all we ask is, how much indigestible stuff can be crammed into it!”

Always, after these bursts of eloquence, he seemed to forget himself for a moment, and only to hold on to the thread of thought by some single word. “Yes, crammed,” he repeated. “We went through all that stage of the disease--had it bad, I warrant you! Of course, as the Examination was all in all, we tried to put in just what was wanted--and the great thing to aim at was, that the Candidate should know absolutely nothing beyond the needs of the Examination! I don’t say it was ever quite achieved: but one of my own pupils (pardon an old man’s egotism) came very near it. After the Examination, he mentioned to me the few facts which he knew but had not been able to bring in, and I can assure you they were trivial, Sir, absolutely trivial!”

I feebly expressed my surprise and delight.

The old man bowed, with a gratified smile, and proceeded. “At that time, no one had hit on the much more rational plan of watching for the individual scintillations of genius, and rewarding them as they occurred. As it was, we made our unfortunate pupil into a Leyden-jar, charged him up to the eyelids--then applied the knob of a Competitive Examination, and drew off one magnificent spark, which very often cracked the jar! What mattered that? We labeled it ‘First Class Spark’, and put it away on the shelf.”

“But the more rational system--?” I suggested.

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“Ah, yes! that came next. Instead of giving the whole reward of learning in one lump, we used to pay for every good answer as it occurred. How well I remember lecturing in those days, with a heap of small coins at my elbow! It was ‘A very good answer, Mr. Jones!’ (that meant a shilling, mostly). ‘Bravo, Mr. Robinson!’ (that meant half-a-crown). Now I’ll tell you how that worked. Not one single fact would any of them take in, without a fee! And when a clever boy came up from school, he got paid more for learning than we got paid for teaching him! Then came the wildest craze of all. “

“What, another craze?” I said.

“It’s the last one,” said the old man. “I must have tired you out with my long story. Each College wanted to get the clever boys: so we adopted a system which we had heard was very popular in England: the Colleges competed against each other, and the boys let themselves out to the highest bidder! What geese we were! Why, they were bound to come to the University somehow. We needn’t have paid ‘em! And all our money went in getting clever boys to come to one College rather than another! The competition was so keen, that at last mere money-payments were not enough. Any College, that wished to secure some specially clever young man, had to waylay him at the Station, and hunt him through the streets. The first who touched him was allowed to have him.”

“That hunting-down of the scholars, as they arrived, must have been a curious business,” I said. “Could you give me some idea of what it was like?”

“Willingly!” said the old man. “I will describe to you the very last Hunt that took place, before that form of Sport (for it was actually reckoned among the Sports of the day: we called it ‘Cub-Hunting’) was finally abandoned. I witnessed it myself, as I happened to be passing by at the moment, and was what we called ‘in at the death’. I can see it now!” he went on in an excited tone, gazing into vacancy with those large dreamy eyes of his “It seems like yesterday; and yet it happened--” He checked himself hastily, and the remaining words died away into a whisper.

“How many years ago did you say?” I asked, much interested in the prospect of at last learning some definite fact in his history.

“Many years ago,” he replied. “The scene at the Railway-Station had been (so they told me) one of wild excitement. Eight or nine Heads of Colleges had assembled at the gates (no one was allowed inside), and the Station-Master had drawn a line on the pavement, and insisted on their all standing behind it. The gates were flung open! The young man darted

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through them, and fled like lightning down the street, while the Heads of Colleges actually yelled with excitement on catching sight of him! The Proctor gave the word, in the old statutory form, 'Semel! Bis! Ter! Currite!', and the Hunt began! Oh, it was a fine sight, believe me! At the first corner he dropped his Greek Lexicon: further on, his railway-rug: then various small articles: then his umbrella: lastly what I suppose he prized most, his hand-bag; but the game was up: the spherical Principal of--of--"

"Of which College?" I said.

"--of one of the Colleges", he resumed, "had put into operation the Theory--his own discovery--of Accelerated Velocity, and captured him just opposite to where I stood. I shall never forget that wild breathless struggle! But it was soon over. Once in those great bony hands; escape was impossible!"

"May I ask why you speak of him as the 'spherical' Principal?" I said.

"The epithet referred to his shape, which was a perfect sphere. You are aware that a bullet, another instance of a perfect sphere, when falling in a perfectly straight line, moves with Accelerated Velocity?"

I bowed assent.

"Well, my spherical friend (as I am proud to call him) set himself to investigate the causes of this. He found them to be three. One; that it is a perfect sphere. Two that it moves in a straight line. Three; that its direction is not upwards. When these three conditions are fulfilled, you get Accelerated Velocity."

"Hardly," I said: "if you will excuse my differing from you. Suppose we apply the theory to horizontal motion. If a bullet is fired horizontally, it--"

"--it does not move in a straight line," he quietly finished my sentence for me.

"I yield the point," I said. "What did your friend do next?"

"The next thing was to apply the theory, as you rightly suggest, to horizontal motion. But the moving body, ever tending to fall, needs constant support, if it is to move a true horizontal line. 'What, then,' he asked himself, will give constant support to a moving body?' And his answer was 'Human legs!' That was the discovery that immortalized his name!"

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“His name being?” I suggested.

“I had not mentioned it,” was the gentle reply of my most unsatisfactory informant. “His next step was an obvious one. He took to a diet of suet-dumplings, until his body had become a perfect sphere. Then he went out for his first experimental run--which nearly cost him his life!”

“How was that?”

“Well, you see, he had no idea of the tremendous new force in Nature that he was calling into play. He began too fast. In a very few minutes he found himself moving at a hundred miles an hour! And, if he had not had the presence of mind to charge into the middle of a haystack (which he scattered to the four winds) there can be no doubt that he would have left the Planet he belonged to, and gone right away into Space!”

“And how came that to be the last of the Cub-Hunts?” I enquired.

“Well, you see, it led to a rather scandalous dispute between two of the Colleges. Another Principal had laid his hand on the young one, so nearly at the same moment as the spherical one, that there was no knowing which had touched him first. The dispute got into print, and did us no credit, and, in short, Cub-Hunts came to an end. Now I’ll tell you what cured us of that wild craze of ours, the bidding against each other, for the clever scholars, just as if they were articles to be sold by auction! Just when the craze had reached its highest point, and when one of the Colleges had actually advertised a Scholarship of one thousand pounds per annum, one of our tourists brought us the manuscript of an old African legend--I happen to have a copy of it in my pocket. Shall I translate it for you?”

“Pray go on,” I said, though I felt I was getting very sleepy.