

**WITHIN
THE PRECINCTS**

VOL. II.

BY
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WITHIN THE PRECINCTS.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MUSICIAN AT HOME.

THE Signor's house was one of those which, when general peacefulness had made the battlements round St. Michael's unnecessary, had grown within the outer wall. It was more like a growth than a building. Windows which looked, as we have said, as if cut in the side of a precipice, gave light to the small panelled chambers which were connected by bits of quaint passages, here and there by a little flight of stairs, with tiny vestibules and landing-places, wasting the little space there was. Room after room had no doubt been added as necessity arose, and each new room had to be connected somehow with the others. The house occupied more space than a comfortable ugly modern house with tolerably sized rooms would have done, and when the Signor came into possession it had been a miracle of picturesque awkwardness, not a room in it capable of holding more than three or four people at a time, yet as many rooms as would have lodged a dozen—the least possible use for the greatest possible expenditure of space. The Signor, however, had built on the inner side a dining-room in red brick, which made existence possible, though it failed in the point of beauty. To tell the truth, the musician's dining-room was an eyesore to all the antiquaries and all the critics. Nobody knew by what neglect of the architect, by what partiality of the Board of Works, it had been permitted to be built. It was of no style at all, neither Gothic, like the original building, nor Queen Anne, like the fashion. He had failed in his duty in every respect. It was a square box with a large window filling up one side. It was lighted with gas. It had red curtains in bold and uncompromising rep, and a large

mahogany sideboard of the worst period. How he had been allowed to build this monstrosity nobody knew. It had been made the subject of a painful discussion in the Chapter itself, where Canon Skeffington (the Honble. and Revd.) complained so bitterly of the injury done to his best principles and highest feelings, that the Dean was irritated, and took up the cudgels on his side on behalf of his favourite musician. "He has a right, I suppose, to make himself comfortable like the rest of us," the head of the community said. "No right to make my life a burden to me," said the Honourable Canon; and, he added, almost weeping, "I cannot look out of my window without seeing the thing. You talk at your ease, you others——" But what was to be done? The Chapter could not take so bold a step as to invade the rights of private property, tear down the Signor's red curtains, burn his sideboard, destroy his walls. He had to be left to the enjoyment of his villainous erection. The Signor laughed in his sleeve, but in public was remorseful, bemoaning his own ignorance of art, and declaring that if he could afford it, rather than give pain to Canon Skeffington—but then he could not afford it—and what was to be done? He kept his dining-room, which was big enough to accommodate his friends, but for himself the Signor had better taste than he professed to have. His favourite sitting-room was in the same position and had the same view as that of his housekeeper, but its window was between two buttresses of the wall, which held in their gigantic arms a little square shelf of green turf, a small projection of the hill, which above and below was covered with masonry, leaving this little ledge of grass, like one of the hanging gardens of Scripture, hung high in the air above the town and the landscape. The Signor's window opened upon this little terrace. His room within was low and dark, but in summer at least this mattered little, for its dim light and shadowy walls made a pleasant

shelter, like a bower in a wood, from the lightness and brightness outside. There was a heavy beam across the roof, from which hung a little chandelier of old Venice glass, reflected in a tall old mirror among the oak panels over the mantelpiece, and not much more bright than they were. On one side were the carved doors of a cupboard in the wall, which was full of old music, the Signor's chief treasures, and on the other was a range of low bookshelves, also filled with music books of every size and kind. The piano stood in the corner near the window, with the keyboard close to the light. There were a few chairs about the room, and a writing-table piled with papers. This was all the furniture of the dim little chamber, and it was impossible to imagine a greater contrast than existed between it and the new building which had so shocked Canon Skeffington. And the Signor was not in this particular much unlike his house. A touch of sentiment, which some people were disposed to call high-flown, mingled in him with a curious undercurrent of cynicism, which few people suspected at all. He liked to jar upon the Canon Skeffingtons of existence and ruffle their tempers and their finest feelings. But in his heart he had feelings equally fine, and was as easily *froissé* as they. He mocked at them on the very points in which he himself was weak, affecting an insensibility which he did not feel, building the vile modern room with profound enjoyment of their delicate distress, but retiring out of it himself to the shelter of this dim romantic chamber. The combination was very like the Signor.

On this particular evening, when young Purcell went to call for lights, the Signor was seated out on his little terrace enjoying the twilight and a cigarette together. There were two chairs on the scrap of grass, and a little table with an inkstand upon it, and the cup in which the Signor had taken his black coffee after dinner. He

was leaning back in his chair puffing out the fragrant smoke from his cigarette, lazily watching it as it floated upwards, and now and then noting down a bar or two of music upon a piece of paper in his hand. Sometimes he took the cigarette from his mouth and hummed a scrap of an air, keeping time with his head and hand. There was no one who was more popular in the country as a composer of graceful drawing-room songs than Signor Rossinetti. It was something refined, something elegant that was expected from him, delicate soprano melodies, fine combinations for tenors and altos. It was very seldom that he took any trouble about the bass, but his tenor songs were justly considered exquisite. He liked to have a pretty set of verses on hand, and “set” them in the intervals of more serious business. The summer evening, when he sat out after dinner upon his scrap of terrace, was the time when he had most inspiration. His pupil and *protégé*, young Purcell, thought there was no intellectual pleasure higher and more elevating, than to sit out here in the shadow of the great grey buttresses, with the cheerful distant noises of the High Street floating upward from the foot of the wall, and to watch the Signor composing his song. The young fellow would run in to the piano and “try over” every line of the symphony as it came welling out from that fount of music. He said often that, except one thing, there was no such delight in the world. To see genius working under his very eyes, what a privilege it was! To Purcell it seemed that his master read his heart, and uttered his deepest sentiments for him in those compositions. Tonight his mind had been lulled out of great commotion and disturbance by the rosy vision of love and happiness that had breathed through the notes. It was glad, it was sad, it was full of suggestion, it wrung the very heart of Purcell—“’Twas in the time of roses, they plucked them as they passed.” Would that time ever come for him? He thought the Signor had read the depths of his

heart, the wistful longing which was sometimes hope and sometimes despair, the pictures he made to himself of one day wandering by *her* side, one day gathering roses for her. He murmured over and over the tune of the refrain in a kind of ecstasy as he went to his mother's room, his fancy excited, his head all on fire, half with the delicious sense of being friend to such a genius, and sharing, as it were, the very inspiration that produced such beautiful things—and half with the pride and delight of being so deeply in love and hanging on so exquisite an edge of anguish. The Signor himself did not know how much those pretty compositions of his went to his pupil's heart; but he was flattered—as who would not be?—by this never-failing appreciation of his work, and youthful enthusiasm. It pleased him vaguely, just as the floating sounds from below, the voices and noises, all softened by the warm air of the summer evening, and even by the dimness of the twilight, pleased him. How harmonious they became as they soared upwards, all that was harsh taken out of them, filling the solitude with a genial sense of human fellowship! Perhaps the Signor was, like many others, not too fond of his fellow-creatures close at hand; but as they went and came, far down at his feet, talking, calling to each other, shouting their wares, singing now and then, making a sound of their steps upon the pavement, and a movement of their breathing in the air, he was transported with the hum, and felt that he loved them. This always gave him inspiration, this and the glimmer of the river and of the distant villages scattered over the plain, throwing up here and there a dim point of a spire among the trees. When Purcell left him, he put aside the bit of music-paper on which he had been jotting down his chords. He raised his eyes to the profound unfathomable blue above, and swung back upon his chair. He was half giddy with the sense of circling depths of infinity above him, though himself raised so high.

The Signor was not without a feeling that he was raised very high, not only in locality, but in soul; yet there was a heaven above which made his head giddy when he looked up—a heaven full of stars, from Palestrina to Mendelssohn, all shining over him, serene, unapproachable, not even holding out any encouragement to him, passive and splendid as the other stars which hid themselves in that still-luminous blue. Would any one ever look up at that sky and recall his name as also among the ranks of the unapproachable? The Signor turned his eyes from it with a sigh as he heard some one enter the room, and came down to earth, letting his chair drop upon its four legs, and his mind return to the present. He watched through the open window the advent of old Pickering carrying the lamp. The old man put it down on the table, and lighted some candles on the mantelpiece in front of the dim mirror, which gave them back with a blurred, enlarged reflection. His master sat outside and watched him pottering about the room, setting the chairs against the wall, and vainly attempting to make everything “straight.” It was a standing grievance to old Pick that he was not allowed to close the window and draw the curtains as it was right to do. The Signor outside sat and watched him with a gentle amusement. He liked to feel the oddness and superiority of his own tastes, thrown into evidence by the mighty anxiety of old Pick to shut the window. A smile came over his face. To ordinary mortals, in ordinary houses, it was not necessary to seek inspiration from the skies and the wide world of evening air. As Pick approached the window, with his usual look of wistful anxiety to be allowed to do what was right, and tacit disapproval of lawless habits, the Signor stepped through, smiling. “I think you will shut me out some night, Pick,” he said, “and then you will have my blood on your soul—for what could I do upon the terrace? I should fall asleep and tumble over, and be picked up in little pieces at the foot

of the hill.”

“Ah! I don’t feel no fear of that, sir,” said Pickering, shaking his head; “you’ve got too good a voice for that, sir. I don’t make no doubt that you could hold an A sharp till you frightened the whole Abbey. And besides I always looks out; I’ve got the habit in this house. Even the girl, she’ll go and stand at the window, as if the view was any matter to her; it’s a thing as carries one away. But I don’t hold with leaving all open when the lights are lighted. Bless you, the top windows in the street with a spyglass, or even with good eyes like what I had when I was young, they could see in.”

“Much good it would do them,” said the Signor, sitting down before his piano. And indeed it is quite true that as he sat close to the window, relieved against the light of the lamp within, there were eyes at the top windows opposite which could catch with difficulty the outline of the Signor’s pale profile and black moustache. Some of the young ladies in the shops would climb up occasionally and show that exciting prospect to a friend. But it was an amusement which palled after the first moment, and certainly did no harm to the Signor.

“Maybe not much good, sir,” said old Pick, who always would have the last word; “but it might do harm. You never can tell what folks will say. The less they know the more they’ll talk; and that’s true all the world over; though I will say for the Abbey as it’s as bad or worse than most other places.”

“Why should it be worse, Pick?”

“I don’t know, sir—unless it’s the clergy and the chevaliers. You see, when gentlemen has little or nothing to do, they’re brought down to the level of the women, so far as that goes—and

as gentlemen always does things more thorough than the women when they're once started, the consequence nat'rally is—Leastways that's my notion of it," said Pick;—"the women haven't the strength to start a real talking as does harm. They tries hard—as hard as they knows how—but bless you, in that as in most things, they wants a man to show 'em the way."

"That is a new view, Pick. I thought if there was one thing in which the ladies had the advantage of us——"

"There ain't one thing, sir, not one. For my part, I can tell in a minute a story as will hang together, a real crusher, one as will drive folks distracted and ruin a family. You'll never get that out of a woma n's tongue. Nay, nay, they hasn't the force for it; they're poor creatures at the best; they can make a person uncomfortable, but they can't do no more. And when I say the Abbey's as bad or maybe worse, I mean that the gentlemen has little to do, and they has to amuse themselves the same as the women. That's what I mean to say."

The Signor gave a half attention to Pick's long speech while he sat at his piano. All the time he was running over his new composition with one hand, correcting a note here and there, changing a harmony. "'Twas in the time of roses—the time of roses," he hummed softly under his breath. But the smile on his lip was for Pick, and he gave him a negligent half attention, amused by his chatter, and by the peculiar views he held forth. He looked up at him as Pick stopped, singing with a little flourish in the accompaniment, which meant satisfaction in having at last got the phrase to his mind—"Twas in the time of roses—the time of roses——" Old Pick was not surprised by the utterance of a sentiment so foreign to his subject. He knew his master's ways,

and he took a certain interest in his master's productions, such as old servants often benevolently accord to the doings of their "family." He could not tell what folks saw in them—still, as the Signor's productions, he looked upon them with kindly toleration all the same.

"You may say, sir," he cried, "'the time o' roses'—that's just the very thing; for, I daresay, but for that rose in his button-hole, and the jaunty looks of him, a young girl wouldn't have seen nothing in him. But I don't know neither—women is the queerest things on the face of this whole earth. Flatter them, or make them think they're bettering themselves, and there's nothing they won't do."

"Who is it that wears flowers in his button-hole?" said the Signor. He wore them himself, and he was curious and slightly excited, wondering if any gossip could by any chance have got up about himself. The idea of such a thing kindled him into interest; his right hand dropped off from the piano, though with the other hand he kept softly sounding notes in the bass, and he turned towards his old servant with a look of animation altogether new. What interest is there like that with which one anticipates hearing something about oneself?

But at this moment Purcell's steps were heard coming quickly along the passage, and he came in with his head erect, and his eyes gleaming, and pushed old Pick out of his way. "That will do, Pick," he said, with a glimmer of impatience, "that will do! I will set things right for the master, myself."

"What is the matter, boy?"

"Matter or no matter, if you think I'll leave it to the first that

comes to look after my master—” said old Pick, standing his ground. He would not yield; he was very friendly in general to Mr. John, and ready to do what he ordered, but there are limits to everything. He stood his ground steadily, arranging and rearranging the papers on the table, while young Purcell went forward to the Signor. The young fellow put himself behind the musician, between him and the window, and stooped to whisper in his ear. His glowing eyes, his eager aspect, made a great impression on the Signor, who was very impressionable. He was possessed by some new thought. “Master,” he said, breathless, “I have a hundred things to say to you. I have heard something new. I want your advice, I want your help.” He was breathless, as if he had been running a race, though all he had really done had been to come along a few yards of passage. The Signor was easily moved by the sight of emotion, and he was fond of his *protégé*. “Go, Pick,” he said immediately, “and bring us some tea.”

“Tea, sir!” said the old man in consternation. “You never takes it. If it’s nothing but to get rid of old Pick, I’ll go. I’ll go; never fear but I’ll go.”

“I want some tea,” said the Signor authoritatively; “foolish old man, would you spoil my new song for want of a cup of tea? Go to Mrs. Purcell, and tell her, with my compliments, I want some of her special brew—the very best, as she used to make it for me when I had headaches. Quick, my head threatens to ache now. Well! what is it, boy? Has the Queen sent for you to be the head of her orchestra, or is the Dean coming to pay us a visit? It must be something very important to judge by your face.”

“Oh, sir,” cried young Purcell, “what a heart you have! making up a headache and a whole story to save old Pick’s feelings—and

me that am really no better than he is, pushing him out of the way!”

“Nobody is any better than any other,” said the Signor in his measured tones. “I have tried to teach you so all your life. But I will allow that some are worse than others,” he added, with a smile. His disciple was too much occupied, however, with the urgency of his own case to notice what he said.

“Master,” said the young man, “I have hurried back to tell you I have changed my mind; I will take the organ at Sturminster after all.”

An almost imperceptible change came over the Signor’s face—that slight stiffening of the muscles of the mouth—continuance of the easy and genial smile of real satisfaction into the forced and uncomfortable one of pretended equanimity—which is the sign above all others of disappointment and displeasure, became visible in his face. “Well——” he said slowly; “why not—if you think it will be more to your advantage? After all, that is the grand test.”

“It is not that,” said young Purcell, shrinking a little; “you can’t think that I would leave you only for my advantage. No, master, it is not that. You must hear it all before you judge.”

“Certainly,” said the Signor. He kept the same smile rigid upon his face. “And in the meantime here is old Pick with the tea,” he added, “and we must drink it for the sake of his feelings. What, Pick, is it made already? I don’t think your mother can be so careful as usual, boy, about her brew.”

“I don’t put no faith in tea that stands long to draw, sir,” said Pick. “I like it myself with all the scent in it. Water as boils hard,

and not a minute lost. That's my maxim. It's fresh made with plenty of tea in, and I'll warrant it good. Smell that," he said, taking off the lid of the teapot. The Signor listened to him quietly, taking no notice of Purcell's impatience. He smiled on the old man and let him talk. He was wounded and offended by his pupil's sudden change after the decision of an hour ago; and though he had a great desire to hear what reason could be given for this difference of feeling, his annoyance and disgust at the change found expression in this apparent carelessness of it. He kept Pick talking with secret malice, while Purcell fretted. The young fellow did not know how to contain himself. He collected the music-books that were on the piano, and put them back on the shelves. Then he took them down again; he shifted the candles; he roamed from corner to corner, moving the chairs about, throwing into disorder the things on the table; now and then he cast a piteous look at his master; but the Signor sat, in serene malice sounding the bass notes in his accompaniment, putting artful questions to old Pickering, and leading him on to talk. It was the old man himself at length who brought the suspense to an end by recollecting something it was necessary for him to do. "They'd have kep' me there all night," he said to Mrs. Purcell, with pretended impatience, as he got back to the housekeeper's room. "Dear!" said Mrs. Purcell, astonished; she could not understand how the Signor could waste time talking to old Pick at a moment so momentous for her John.

When old Pickering was gone, the Signor still said nothing. He turned to the piano and began to play; he was like a woman offended, who will not approach the subject on which she is dying to be informed. At last Purcell, approaching humbly with wistful eyes, ventured to put one hand lightly upon his arm.

"Master," said the young man, "let me speak to you. I cannot

do anything till I have spoken to you.”

“To me, boy? Speak then, as much as you please,” said the Signor, nodding at him with an air of ingenuous wonder while he rang out the end of the melody. “’Twas in the time of roses,” he sang; then swinging himself round on his stool, “You want to speak to me? Why didn’t you say so sooner? Speak then, I am all attention,” he said.

Then Purcell began, once more breathless with agitation and excitement: “I think there seems a chance for me, sir,” he said; “my mother has just been telling me. It is such a chance as never may happen again. You know I love St. Michael’s better than anything in the world—except one thing. Master, *she* is in trouble; her home is about to be made impossible to her; now or never; if I had a home to offer her, she might accept it. This is why I said I would take Sturminster. St. Ermengilde is more to my mind, a thousand times more to my mind; and to be near you, to have the benefit of your advice, that would be everything for me. But, dear master,” said the young man, “must I not think of her first? and here is a chance for me, perhaps the only chance I may have in my life.”

“Has anything happened to Miss Despard?” said the Signor in great surprise. He recognised the justice of the plea, and he listened with great interest and sympathy, and a curious feeling which was neither sympathy nor interest. Lottie was to the Signor a mysterious creature, exciting an altogether different kind of feeling from that which he felt for his pupil. He was almost sentimentally attached to his pupil, and entered into the history and prospects of his love with an enthusiasm quite unlike that with which a mature Englishman generally interests himself in anybody’s love-affairs.

But along with this sentiment there existed another almost directly opposite to it, an interest in Lottie as a being of a totally different class from Purcell, of whom it would be profoundly curious to know the history, and the means by which she might perhaps be brought to look favourably on—nay, to marry—Purcell; which seemed to the Signor quite “on the cards.” How she might be brought to this, in what way she would reconcile herself to be Purcell’s wife; how she would bow a spirit, evidently so proud, to the young musician’s origin and to his ways of talking, which, though refined enough, were still at the bottom those of a man whose mother was “in service:” all this was captivating as a matter of study to the Signor; he got, or expected to get, a great deal of amusement out of it, expecting that Lottie’s struggles in fitting herself for the position would be wonderful enough: so that his interest cannot be called entirely benevolent. But between this keen and half-malign interest and the sentimental interest he took in Purcell’s “happiness,” it may be imagined that the crisis was nearly as exciting to him as it was to Purcell himself. He listened to the story with the warmest interest, and agreed that there was nothing for it but to accept Sturminster. “But you must not lose a day,” he said; “you must secure the lady at once, there is not a moment to lose.”

“Secure?” Purcell said, growing red and growing white; “then you think there is a hope, a—likelihood——”

“Think? I think there is an almost certainty!” cried the Signor. He became quite excited himself for the sake of his pupil and for his own sake, for the keen intellectual interest he felt in this curious problem as to what Lottie would do. “You must go to-morrow,” he cried, with all the eagerness of a personal interest; “you must not lose a single day.”

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