

## THE VIOLONCELLO'S NEXT ENGAGEMENT.



HE glories of the entertainment have faded, down goes gas, out scramble audience. It is the last night of the season; and the band, sorrowfully, gloomily every one, from the big drum down to the piccolo, are playing the National Anthem over said season's

grave to give it decent burial. Even the first fiddle feels out of sorts. The bassoon has a tear-drop trembling on his left eye-lash, and lets it hang there, unsuspecting of the fact that all the while it glistens visibly in a tiny ray from the footlight. As for the violoncello next him, that cliff-browed, set-faced, hoary-headed old veteran of a score or two of pantomimes, surely this particular pantomime's death grieves him but little. Why should it—whilst he can twine his bony left arm around that old violoncello's neck as if it lived and loved him; when he can bend his grey head to its strings and hear the sweet pathos of their tones; when he can pass his long, skinny musician's fingers fondly over them to draw forth rich, soothing, swelling, falling, beautiful melody? Why should there be a quivering lip and a trembling eyelash when the last chord comes?

The chord is struck and over. Out of the orchestra and already on his way home is the first violin; the cornet has brought up the rear with a *cadenza morando*; the big drum has closed his last roll; the second violin has packed up his fiddle-case; bassoon and violoncello remain alone with the dying lights in the hall.

"Dick!" said the bassoon quietly.

Poor old white-faced violoncello never heeded. The left arm in its rusty sleeve still clasped the instrument's neck in that loving way; the old grey head bent down over the strings, with the eyes closed.

"Poor old chap!" observed the bassoon pityingly, as he turned up his coat-collar and tucked his instrument-case under his arm. "Blowed if he ain't a-playin' now!"

"Dick—Dick!" he repeated, tapping the old violoncello good-naturedly on the shoulder. The old man opened his eyes and awoke to the silence.

"Hallo, Tom Hornby! What—all gone? I thought"—he looked around him in disappointed inquiry, and

spoke in a tone of sadness—"I thought he repeated that second strain. Well, well! How deaf I'm getting, to be sure!" The rusty black coat heaved with a sigh as its wearer rose and shut his music.

"All gone but you, Tom?" he said sorrowfully. "Well, I won't deny I thought they might ha' wished me 'Good night,' or 'Good-bye,' or something of the sort, for the last night; but I won't grumble. An old fellow who's as deaf as a post and has nobody to mind him ain't no place in an orchestra. He'd better get out of the road as quick as he can, and make no fuss about it. Friends ain't in his line."

"Now come, Dick, old man," expostulated the bassoon, "don't go for to speak like that. You knows there's one chap as is sorry for you—dash my hide if he ain't! Yes, says I, Dick; count me as your friend whenever you like. There's a bed for you and the same fare as I has myself whenever you like to claim 'em; and if we can't find you another 'sit' somewheres directly, it's a pity. Blow me, it's a pity!"

"Tom Hornby, you're a good-hearted fellow," returned the violoncello gratefully, as his stolid face relaxed a little before the bassoon's genial smile. "A useless, old, worn-out blessing like mine ain't much to give anybody," he continued, "but such as it is, Tom, take it for your kindness; and may you never have such a black world before you as I've got now."

They shook hands; the bassoon stepped through the little narrow door beneath the stage; and his companion, bearing his unwieldy violoncello, extinguished the last gas-jet as he followed him.

"Good night, Dick; and don't be down-hearted, old man. Your next engagement 'll make amends."

"Good night, Tom Hornby; God bless you."

Again they shook hands; then bassoon whistled off into the hurrying crowd at the stage-door, and violoncello turned to face the wind the other way. Out into the bleak street, where tiny yellow rushlights of lamps cast a melancholy glimmer or two upon crowds of hurrying faces, some fat and round, some red and well-favoured, some blue and ill-favoured: all hurrying along through the little snow-dots which the wind blew about. Old violoncello buttoned his rusty coat close, and turned up the collar as if the wind might find that an obstacle in its attacks upon his scraggy old throat, whilst he hugged that dingy big fiddle of his tight against his body, and settling his eyes straight before him, dragged his trembling knees in the direction they pointed. Up one street and down another; along a wide white road, lined with tall white mansions; down a narrow, wriggling, dark alley, lined with rickety lodging-houses. On he trudged through the grey pulpy mud of trampled snow.

On and on to that dreary blank of future which lay before him, the old lack-lustre eyes fixed in that straightforward look of despair, the cold loneliness



steadily settling down upon his aged heart to brood there. For the season was over, and old violoncello had struck his last chord at the hall.

"You see, Dobbs," the leader of the orchestra had said, "now the full season's over it's unreasonable to expect the management to keep up such a band, so much as it goes against me to say it, we must part."

"Quite right," had chimed in the manager with the ferocious moustache. "Establishment expenses must be cut down, my man; everybody can't stop on; so there you are! Might as well ask me to keep extra bandsmen out of my own salary!"

So old violoncello struck his last chord and went with a leaden heart. Good-hearted Tom Hornby comforted him with hopes of that next engagement. But who would have him—poor, old, worn-out, deaf as he was? Nobody, he said. And his heart sank like a lump of cold lead as he thought of that answer.

The pulpy slush changed to white untrodden snow upon the path; the streets were quieter and darker. Old violoncello reached his humble lodging, admitted himself by his latch-key, climbed the three flights of rickety stairs. In the tiny garret at the top of them was a fireless grate, a square white bed, a table, a chair, and a window—one broken pane of which was stopped with brown paper. As he lighted his two

inches of lean candle and showed these, the old man sat down upon the chair and bent his grey head upon the table. No tear was in his eyes when he lifted them. He drew his violoncello closer to him; he hugged it as he might a favourite child; then he bent his head once more upon the little table, and his bow slipped to the floor from the numbed fingers which clasped it.

Lower and lower burned the candle, whilst outside, upon the bars of the window-panes, white snow gathered higher and higher as the flakes kept falling.

When the blanched face was again upturned the eyes were moistened.

"So we've come to it at last, have we, old fiddle?" the old man moaned in apostrophe of his loved violoncello, as he stooped to pick up the bow. "We're old now, both of us; we're no use now! You're patched and cracked, and your master's deaf—they don't want a pair like us nowadays. We're ready almost for our last engagement. Yes, old fiddle; you've been a good servant to your old master, and you could do something, too, in your day; but not much longer—not very much longer. We're old now; they can do without us."

A tear dropped upon the finger-board, and the old man wiped it carefully off with his coat-sleeve.



"POOR OLD CHAP! BLOWED IF HE AIN'T A-PLAYIN' NOW!" (p. 307).





"OLD VIOLONCELLO HAD GONE TO HIS LAST ENGAGEMENT."

"Yes, old friend," he continued, gazing affectionately on his battered companion of wood and strings, "we've been friends for long, but we're coming to our last engagement."

Whilst the snow-flakes fell thicker and thicker against the window, softly and noiselessly, the old man drew his bow across the strings of the violoncello in a half-unconscious way, bending down his head to the instrument just as he always did. Though his ears were deaf to aught else, they never failed to drink in the tones which sprang from those vibrating cords. Slowly, weirdly, pathetically, the music rose and fell in gentle ripples around the room, so hushed and low that it awakened no echoes in the silent house. Only in that poor chamber would it wander; only around that poor old couple, instrument and player, would its sweet melody float. As he played the old man's eyes gently closed, and from his face the lines of settled despair gradually cleared away, till only a happy smile was left beaming around wrinkles. The player's thoughts were far away; to him the cold room and the snowy window were become as nought. Back in the little garden of fifty years ago, in the arbour scented by the pinks and roses, with the dark velvet pansies clustering the little plot at his feet, he was listening again to that same old tune as he heard it first, when the wife, long dead, sang the words, and he played the

air upon that well-remembered violin. He could hear her voice; he could smell the roses' perfume. Surely it was that same violin he was playing now! From his closed eyes, down the white cheeks, tears dropped warm and fast upon the strings of the violoncello. He heeded them not; his thoughts were far away.

So the tune rose and fell, and the snow gathered thicker and thicker on the window-panes, till the candle on the little table flickered out. Yet the arm in the rusty sleeve did not weary in its slow regular motion: the cold fingers still pressed the strings; the player did not awake to the darkness of the room.

"We're old now," he murmured; "they don't want us any longer."

His eyes were still shut; but the tune waxed slower and slower and slower, till it died altogether. The bow slipped from the old man's fingers; the grey head sank upon the table; the violoncello rested soundless against the breast of the rusty black coat.

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When the morning came and bright sun-rays struggled through the snow-blocked window-panes, they shone upon a tiny table, a square white bed, a fireless grate, a patched and dingy old violoncello. But the bow had fallen upon the floor, and the player's nerveless fingers hung white and stiffened upon the strings.

Old Violoncello had gone to his last engagement.

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