CHAPTER IX

PETER BATT

OR, THE MAN WHO LOST CHRISTMAS-DAY

OF all the days in the three hundred and sixty-five, no one was ever so replete with joy and happiness to Peter Batt as the Twenty-fifth of December. With him it had been a red-letter day through life. As a child he frisked and gambolled on his father's hearth. As a youth he had joined in all the gaieties and festivities which that particular period of the year affords and as a husband and father, Peter had always contrived to indulge on this day, in the luxuries of the season. For many years he had never failed, by honest and patient industry, to provide hearty and cheerful fare for himself and those dependent on him; and each successive Christmas day brought with it some new delight or gratification. Truly Peter enjoyed himself to his heart's content and was never more happy than when surrounded by those he loved who, with their smiling faces, warmed and cheered his heart, as they did justice to his kindness and hospitality. Peter was like unto all things human. Honest, simple-hearted Peter had his share of what philosophers (who of course never possess it themselves) call vanity. What! A man living in one of the most retired nooks in the kingdom, a man who had seen and enjoyed upwards of fifty Christmas days! The father of six children and husband of Sally Batt, whose tongue might take the pride out of any man - pooh, pooh! Nay, reader, but it was even so!

Among the many moral infirmities which poor human nature is heir to, vanity was a besetting fault of poor Peter, but let not the reader labour under the erroneous idea that it was personal vanity on the part of Peter, for here is his picture.

From the soles of his feet to the crown of his head, we may fairly estimate a structure of about five feet five, habited with excellent neatness and precision, for it is Christmas-day and Peter has donned his best. See how brilliantly his shoes glisten beneath the neat black gaiter surmounting them! Observe the snowy whiteness of the cotton stockings which enclose his well-proportioned lower limbs, again surmounted by the neat black velveteen continuations. A waggish visitor from the great city once ventured to compare Peter's style of dress to the alternate colours of the magpie but his witticism failed - Peter stood too high in the estimation of his rural friends to be affected by such observations. Then see the admirable keeping of the picture, how these are relieved by the square homely-cut of his single but straight-breasted snuff-brown coat, with large yellow metal buttons and upright collar! Well, Peter; I see nothing in thee or thy coat whereof an honest Englishman need feel ashamed. Thy well-set frame bespeaks thee a man of strength, and doubtless thy sinewy arm and hardened hand have wrought worthily for thee and thine. And then thy good-tempered face and twinkling grey eyes, whereof one hath a southerly inclination and the other an affection for the north and withal, thy venerable bald pate. Who shall say thou art not worthy of praise? But where gottest thou that self-satisfied air? Ah I forget, it is Christmas-day and thy destiny is to fulfil certain duties, whereof more anon. Say, then, to what conclusion can we arrive as to the cause of our hero's vain-glory? Truly he is proud of his six children and well he may be, for where shall we find four sons and two daughters in one family more healthy, or more attentive and dutiful to their parents. Then his wife, his Sally! Was there such another housewife in the whole village? To be sure, Sally had a tongue as well as a will of her own and sometimes treated honest Peter with what he facetiously called chin-music, but not after the manner of Michael Boai. Yet, take her for all in all, Sally was a good wife, mother, friend and neighbour and as Peter

“Was to her faults a little blind,
And to her virtues very kind,”

they jogged on harmoniously together and enjoyed a very fair proportion of domestic happiness.

But it is necessary, without further prologue, to acquaint the reader with the mainspring of Peter's ambition and to that end I would direct his observation to that smaller specimen of button which dangles at a little distance from the bright, large, yellow row that ornaments his snuff-brown coat. On that tiny button “hangs our tale,” for thereon is wont to depend the object of his devout affection - the rival of mistress Batt in her husband's love, his ever-petted baby - his *bassoon!* Assume, O Reader, inexperienced in the fervent passion which amateur members of the Orphean family often feel for that particular instrument, through which (in their own opinion) they “discourse most eloquent music.” Assume, I pray thee, no sceptical air at this assurance that Peter Batt, worthy man, good husband as he was, did now and then prefer the fellowship of his bassoon to that of Sally, did sometimes find *its* voice the more enchanting of the two.
Did she first learn to love him I wonder, as with distended cheeks he strove to render his wooden idol lovely in *her* eyes? Madame de Stael somewhere suggests the impossibility of a woman's love being kindled in favour of a man performing on the bassoon. Sally has therefore an opportunity of acquiring fame by denying (if she is able) the insinuation of the celebrated Frenchwoman.

For forty years, as man and boy, had Peter Batt been a prominent member of our village church choir. He had developed all the varieties to which male voices are subject and as he was ambitious of reputation, the whole parish had the benefit of his vocal powers. Unfortunately perhaps, for Peter's future fame as a singer, his father, who was also a bassoon-player, was too much addicted to the habit of flattering his son's “childish treble,” not hesitating in the boy's presence to declare that Peter had “astounden voice,” and that “ye cou’d hear un down t’ bridge,” a distance of nearly half a mile. The natural consequence of this encomium was that Peter wished to make himself heard *beyond* the bridge and to that end so shrieked and squalled as ultimately to crack his voice irreparably. Notwithstanding all his after efforts, he never could be certain whether the note he was about to sound would prove itself a tenor, counter or bass note. This was sadly thwarting the aspirant for fame but when he found that all hope of eminence in that line was quite shut out he one day, in sheer despair, took down from the bacon rack (where it had been placed since his father's death,) the family bassoon.

I should here mention that Peter's common avocation was that of a wheelwright, as his father's had been before him; and I would allude also to a striking historic coincidence, to show why great things might not, under more favourable auspices, have resulted from Peter's cultivation of music. Haydn, the greatest symphonist Germany has yet produced, was the son of a village wheelwright and his father was also musical. I am not aware, certainly, that he practised the bassoon but suffice it that he instilled a love of music into his son, who displayed such early genius and extreme beauty of voice, as to attract the attention of all his friends and neighbours. My readers will recollect the estimation in which the senior Batt held the vocal abilities of his son and heir. Doubtless this admiration extended itself pretty generally through the parish and, but for the non-existence of certain national facilities, it is possible that England also might have produced a symphonist. With the music-loving Germans it always formed an integral feature in their system of education, an indispensable requisite in the qualifications of even a village schoolmaster in Germany is a knowledge of music, and here was the advantage which Haydn possessed over our hero for, attracted by the beauty of his voice, we find the singing master of the royal chapel of St. Stephen's in Vienna visiting the schoolmaster to hear his favourite pupil. The consequence of which was that Haydn was at once removed to the chapel, where he received a regular musical education and Germany had the honour of fostering the genius of this illustrious composer. Now, had corresponding advantages been presented in dear Old England one thing is certain, old Michael Drodge would not have presided over the ploddings of Peter when a student. For poor old Michael in the first place was nearly deaf, in the second, had no knowledge of music, intuitive or acquired, and lastly held it in supreme contempt since nature had deprived him of the power of appreciating it.

But for these drawbacks is it not *possible* that Peter Batt might have attained celebrity as a composer? [Between ourselves, he did make one experiment, with what effect the sequel will show.] But I could not resist this opportunity of remarking on the characteristic differences of the two nations, as it regards music.

Having shown the musical as well as natural origin of our hero, we will now trace him through his earlier years, when, having completed the routine of his education, he commenced his occupation as a wheelwright under his father.
Be it known then that he secured the confidence and esteem of all his neighbours and that, as the old man's infirmities increased, so did Peter's responsibilities. At length his father died just as Peter was competent to carry on the business. Behold him now, his own master, with a thriving trade and no incumbrance, free to make choice of a wife. Under such circumstances, he felt it impossible to resist the influence of his old schoolmaster's daughter, Sally, or rather “Mistress” Drodge, as she was called by the housekeeper at the manor-house, in which establishment she filled the important situation of lady's maid and with her smart cap and neat attire, quite unsettled the heart of Peter. I have before stated that he resorted to the bassoon, hopeless of ever becoming a singer, this was subsequently to his father's death. The fact is, he had been so constant an attendant of the village choir, that he felt quite unhappy in being incapacitated from joining in its performances. This induced him to great exertions (for he was still ambitious) and he therefore practised whenever an opportunity offered.

Could the reader have heard him run up and down the instrument, from the lowest note to the highest, and then close in a cadence of great force and power on the lowest E flat, which he held with “astounden” tenacity and tone, he would have been convinced of the strength of his lungs, if not of the purity of his taste.
Peter was greatly admired perhaps rather from the extraordinary loudness of his performance than the delicacy of his expression but in the particular line he had chosen he could do more than many of the first solo players who have distinguished themselves as bassoonists, he could play the “College Hornpipe,” “Country Bumpkin,” or “Sir Roger de Coverley,” to thirty couples up and down in the same evening and if that is not a pretty good proof of the strength of his lungs, I know not what is. If then “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast,” and if our hero was thus renowned as one of her most favoured votaries, can it be supposed that Sally Drodge could attend the village church every Sunday and hear unmoved of the proficiency of Peter Batt? How often did Peter, in the acme of his best achievements direct his angular orbs of vision into the pew that contained the tender object of his passion! To be sure it required some slight acquaintance with Peter's eyes to ascertain their exact direction but Sally knew the precise degree of their inclination and I incline to think, despite the assertions of Madame de Stael, that his inflated cheeks and energetic strains made a deep impression on her heart. To her, Peter Batt, with his bassoon, was a most interesting if not a romantic specimen of humanity. He had often wished for an opportunity of breathing forth his tender aspirations and vows of eternal love and constancy, when a circumstance occurred that put him at once at rest as to the reciprocity of their feelings.

It had been a custom, from time immemorial, for the choir of the parish church (which respected body of men and boys was under the especial direction of our hero) to perambulate the village during Christmas eve, singing in and before the houses of the most respectable of the inhabitants, the carols and anthems appropriate to the season. This generally took up a great portion of the night and at church on the following day, the same were repeated to the admiration of a very full congregation.

Of course this was an “event” to all the members of the choir in general and to Peter Batt in particular. On the evening of Christmas day the choir was always invited up to the manor-house, where the good squire, his family, his visitors and household, were accustomed to assemble in the hall, some to witness and others to join in the merrymakings which prevailed at this merry period. The performances of the choir were interspersed with the general amusements, which were necessarily suspended for a time, during the business of refreshment and on one occasion, big with the fate of Mrs. Drodge and Peter Batt, by accident or connivance those two personages found themselves seated side by side at the squire's hospitable board.

Now was it that Peter felt his waistcoat heave, particularly on the heart's side, with emotions struggling for utterance which must, alas continue to struggle, at least till after supper! And then! Whether Mrs. Drodge's gentle bosom were agitated by sympathetic feelings, I can't affirm so confidently as I could wish but I still have reasons for thinking that her state of mind was similar to that of a person conscious that a great and long-expected crisis is now close at hand. And so indeed it was. By-and-by it became Peter's turn, in the course of “blind-buff,” with sealed eyes to pursue whom, I wonder? For whose accents did he listen with strained ears and with fixed design, could he but make that capture to lead his prize beneath the hanging mistletoe and there, did Sally Drodge, with that “diplomacy” intuitive (as we have before asserted) to lovers, permit that half-cough to escape, as furnishing a clue to groping Peter or was it actual necessity which forced that expression? And then, that timid shriek of “Oh!” As she flies from his extended arms. But still he follows and she flies not far or fast and now he grasps her and bears her boldly under the consecrating Bough and with unmistakable ardour avails himself of its licence and I, as her historian, should be sorry to be sworn to say, that Mrs. Drodge did her best to elude the pursuit of Peter Batt, or that she resisted his steps towards the mistletoe, or found his salutation so distasteful that its repetition would have angered her. Our hero was otherwise persuaded and with reason, since at that very Christmas twelvemonth the village witnessed the nuptials of Peter Batt and Sally Drodge.

Good reader, as in many a drama of more thrilling interest than the lives and loves of Peter and Sally Batt, it has been the scribe's prerogative to foreclose a tedious current of petty incident, unmarked by any special interest. So now will we imagine an interval of twenty years in the procession of our story and raise the curtain upon our humble characters after the experience of a score of married years has, let us hope, made Peter Batt a still wiser and better man.

Peter has by this time become an indispensable requisite to the well-being of the village. He has been an honest and industrious man and has thriven I should think to his heart's content. Sally retains her place in his affections, which has furthermore been strengthened by six additional ties, all promising and healthy. He has extended his business to great advantage, so much so that he has built himself a new house with workshops and a range of useful outbuildings. And it is a great satisfaction to Peter to stand at some spot which commands the best view of his property and think that, so to speak, he is “monarch of all he surveys.” Yet, as no mortal pilgrimage is ever purely bright, the brow of happy Peter was sometimes beclouded with care, even *his* heart had its vexations and, as his musical genius was instrumental to his discomforts, it will be necessary to make some explanation thereupon.

That “Woman is fickle” is either a currently reported fable or a melancholy truism and though an angel is she in the hour of anguish, yet in the un-afflicted moments of her lordly companion doth she too often derive delight in the proof of his subjugation and pleasure in his perplexity. One of Mrs. Batt's first demonstrations of displeasure was directed at Peter's much-beloved bassoon, against which, as Mrs. Drodge she had never breathed a syllable to indicate indifference, much less dislike.

It was the source of unfeigned consolation to Peter, his bassoon and she knew it. Was she jealous of his having a second bosom comforter, when the church had put that matter exclusively into her hands? Then to be sure, he did sacrifice much time to it, time to which Mrs. Batt may have thought that holy marriage had entitled *her* and not “a plaguey bassoon,” as she was wont in hasty moments to designate that respectable instrument. Now, independently of its conveying a sense of comfort to the ear and breast of Peter, his execution of certain pieces with which his bassoon and his neighbours were become familiar, had long secured the latters’ compliments and had also fired the sons of three of them with the noble zeal of emulation. Could Peter forego with resignation the source of so much pleasure? Above all could he, with fortitude, relinquish “the inoffensive manna of soul-sweetening praise”?

But Mrs. Batt kept up the tune of persecution with wondrous vigour and with weighty argument. “What?” She would like to know from Peter, “what would Mrs. Cinnamon, the grocer's wife, say of Mr. C. if he left her at the church-door on Sundays to go and join a lot of men and boys? Would Mrs. Sweetbread (the butcher's better-half) allow her husband to ‘beneath’ himself and treat *her* in such a manner? She only wanted Peter to speak his mind out and answer her:” But alas! He good man, was no match for his wife in volubility and he therefore dealt with the case in general terms.

“He wasn't going to *argufy*, nor he wasn't going to be put off from playin'.” This was the position which Peter took up at the beginning of the war and which he stoutly maintained for a time against the sharp-shooting of the enemy, but as in a wordy engagement with wives few men may hope to triumph, so Peter begun at last to shrink from the incessant and raking fire of his spouse and the result was that he compromised his dignity as a man to his affection for his instrument and did, stealthily and away from home, that which he had not courage left to do there. And this was much to be regretted for upon such occasions Peter was apt to resort to the “John Barleycorn” where, privately sore at his humiliation, he would assume considerable boldness, defy “th' old ‘ooman” (meaning Mrs. Batt) and walk off with a fixed determination to do great things at home in reference to his bassoon which however, on arriving there and yielding to second thoughts, he was always induced to defer.

Never shone the moon more brightly than on the Christmas eve of 18—. Never on any previous occasion, had so much interest been felt as on that auspicious evening, when the good people of the village were surprised in the arms of Morpheus by “Hark, The Herald Angels Sing!” In original music, composed expressly for the words, by Peter Batt! Yes, Peter had marched forwards, in spite of all opposition and interference, Peter had become a composer. He felt that he was a musician in his heart. We have not space to enter on a critical review of this emanation of his genius but be assured that all he could do had been done.

For some time had he, in kind compliance with Sally's wishes, forsaken the instrument on which he had been wont to luxuriate but as the river, when checked, only gathers an increased force, so did his musical genius burst forth in a written composition, which, as it was produced noiselessly and at home, did not excite the observation of his partner. No sooner was it finished than that “plaguey bassoon” became in constant use and for six weeks did the choir of the village church, under the superintendence of our hero, practice what he called “a Christmas Hymn of my own composin'.” It was highly successful and report soon spread our author's fame. Rival choirs tried to procure copies, but in vain.

At length arrived the longed-for night, on which the public were to have their ears regaled with this splendid production. Big with importance, Peter again took up his bassoon and at the time appointed boldly sallied forth to meet his friends. Before he left his home, a few hints relative to that “plaguey bassoon” had slightly ruffled his temper but two or three glasses of punch at the Barleycorn, the rendezvous of the gloom party, dispelled his gloom and after one trial he felt reassured and animated and “was himself again.”

At twelve o'clock behold our party issuing forth in the full confidence of meriting the approbation of all those Christians who like to be disturbed from their comfortable slumbers on Christmas eve. The success of our hero was beyond all precedent. So much gratified were the villagers, that many of them rose, protruded their nightcaps and prayed for it again. The churchwardens had always made a point of having “something hot” ready for the “quire” on its arrival at their respective houses.
Now both the churchwardens were Peter's particular friends and a wee drop extra was prepared for him and with it came that applause so sweet to an author's ear, that our hero, between the cheering cup and acclamations of his friends, positively forgot himself and by the time the choral party began to wend its way homewards, Peter Batt was in a very elevated and unusual state. I blush to own it, but Peter was decidedly drunk! Alas

“ that men should put an enemy into their mouths to steal away their brains!”

Thus it was that Peter fell. Yes, reader, he fell morally, aye and he fell physically too and two men were obliged to support to his home the author of “A Christmas Hymn of his own composin'.” Behold him, now shouting then hallooing, now severely remonstrating with a non-present Mrs. Batt on her abuse of his bassoon and now attempting to convince his two supporters of his superiority on that delightful instrument. Totally unconscious of where he was the poor composer was left at his own door about six o'clock in the morning.
Poor Sally had gone to bed at the usual hour in sad despair at this new outbreak. She could not sleep, she was too anxious for her husband to allow of that. She lay listening to their singing until the sound was lost in the distance and ever and anon she would fancy she heard them returning and she would leave her bed and look out on the cold, yet bright moonlight and wish for his return. Thus did she pass a restless night until she saw with pain the state in which he was brought home. She immediately went down stairs and with immense difficulty contrived to get Peter up and into bed, though perfectly senseless and overcome with excitement and strong drink.
As soon as she had thus disposed of him, she left to proceed with the numerous duties which devolve on a mother of six children, especially in preparing a seasonable family banquet for Christmas-day. Once or twice she took a candle and crept to the room to ascertain if he was still asleep and comfortable. On the third visit she began to perceive that the sun shining through the curtains was unpleasant to him, as he turned round immediately from it. She remedied the difficulty by fastening a blanket doubled across the window to keep out the light and while she was doing so a scheme occurred to her suddenly which she instantly determined to carry out.

There Peter lay, snoring and dreaming in a condition of sottish clairvoyance. Now he fancied the sun was glittering on all nature and he saw the trees studded, as it were, with myriads of diamonds, the effect of the preceding night's frost and then he saw his own wife and all the children dressed in their best, hastening away to the church and then they met their neighbours and the greetings were mutual and satisfactory and he heard, as he had done for nearly fifty years before, the chime of the village-bells and he recognised the peal of Christmas day and his heart leapt. But when he tried to jump up and join the pleasant groups he saw he could not. He had lost all power of motion and (as he one day confessed to Davy Butler, in confidence,) he “laid like a thinkin' statty.” Then came another season of thick mist upon his senses and he fancied that he heard “the herald angels” singing thehymn “of his own composin' ” then came a volley of applause from listening mortals, which Peter took in greedily particularly what Davy Butler had said at the churchwarden's, that “there was nor another such a genus that way as Mr. Batt, as *he* cou'd hear on in these 'em parts.” Then followed a momentary clearance of the fog which hung upon his faculties and he lifted his leaden head from the pillow and peered through the parting curtains into perfect and unrelieved darkness, while all was silent as night. Then again he pillowed his aching head and in a few minutes another phantasmagoria flitted before his distempered mind. Now he thought himself in church, but whereabouts he could not well make out. There was the good old rector and there his friend the clerk, there also was the choir, but where was himself, Peter Batt? Straining the socket of his mind's eye in order to discover *that* essential, an indescribable figure now fills and now vacates his place clutching a huge bassoon. Now it rolls backward and forward, now its eyes gleam, now it attempts to carry to its waiting jaw the reed of its bassoon, now after infinite eccentric motions that feat is accomplished, but O what unearthly noise ensues! And yes, evidently the bassoonist is drunk, utterly drunk and in church too! Oh, sin! Oh, shame!

The night appeared long and dreary to Peter and he looked wistfully towards the window and longed for some token that it were day. At length his eyes were cheered by the morning-light peeping in at a corner of the lattice and Peter bestirred himself to rise. To inspect and remove the strange covering from the window was his first business and it begun to renew in him an uncomfortable state of feeling. Then the appearance of his clothes was horrifying to his sense of propriety, conveying to his mind the idea of Peter Batt, decent and respectable Peter Batt, in shameful prostration of soul and body.

Furthermore, a crowning indignity, as penitent Peter felt it, he had now to endure and he felt too that it must be endured speechlessly. The button had been severed from his coat by hands in which, morally, he foresaw that he, Peter, must henceforth be mute and passive. His wife who had been watching his bewilderment, was secretly rejoicing at it for she foresaw in his confusion and chagrin the perfect success of her scheme. This became the more evident to her when she witnessed Peter's amazement and additional mortification on hearing that he had actually *lost Christmas Day* and had now awakened on the festival of St. Stephen, or the twenty-sixth of December!

Reader, my tale is ended. Peter became a more discreet, if not a better man and I trust many an amateur may learn from his example, that the true source of gratification lies rather in “the use than in the abuse of art.”