

ROUND THE BANDSTAND

“Sainte-Beuve, as he grew older, came to regard all experience as a single great book; . . . and it seemed all one to him whether you should read in Chapter xx., which is the differential calculus, or in Chapter xxxix., which is hearing the band play in the gardens.”—R. L. STEVENSON. *An Apology for Idlers.*

SHE wondered if he had seen : it had been the merest drifting flirt of her eyes as he had passed, and the band was still brazening out one of Dvorák's Humoresques. She didn't know what it was they were playing—Funny time, she had thought, at first, and then only, Had he seen? Not a bad-looking boy, with his straw-hat a-tilt and his elbows ever so slightly crooked.

Damned sauce that other fellow with the squint had, to ogle her with his near eye. He had passed before, she remembered, and looked at her. Like his impudence, to think A girl standing next to her against the edge of the band-enclosure was whispering to her friend:

“’E said, ‘Go fer a *plain* walk.’ I says, ‘Oo, I don’t go fer *plain* walks,’ I says. ‘W’en I go out I go to the the-etter.’ Fancy! Wanted me t’ go out fer a walk withim once a *fortnight*. Wasn’t ’avin’ any! Well, would *you*?’”

Beaty gave the contemptuous girl—some skivvy, she supposed—a flying glance of scorn. It *was* rather hard lines, for a fellow to think he was doing his duty if he walked you round the houses once a fortnight. More fool *she*, to have taken up with him. Silly young juggins; *looked* a fool, with her gooseberry eyes, and . . . as for that nose, it was FUNNY! Couldn’t wonder at the man keeping it for once a fortnight! Once a year’d be better still! *And* the hair! She patted her own, the tips of her fingers

lightly upon the hairpins, driving home satisfactorily one that had projected. She had the bold and calculating eye herself, quick to seize a possibility and push an advantage; and a mouth that in repose was too thin. The other girl had a great gaping mouth and full lips. Skivvy all over. Made her own dresses, too. Corsets too big, bulging out her blouse, which fell suddenly loose upon her skinny chest.

Ought to be back now, oughtn't he? *Must* be a weary Willy if he didn't get round the bandstand quicker than that! And he didn't look sleepy, either. She swept a long glance scrutinisingly down towards the end of the enclosed grass plot. There he was! Nice little tweaky nose: looked as though he was up to a bit of fun. He was coming, his walk just slightly exaggerated; the faint light moustache on his upper lip almost invisible in the semi-darkness. No end a dog, he was—thought himself, she corrected. How much nearer was he? She'd show Jinny that it didn't matter about Bob. Hullo, what had happened? Had he

stopped? She shot another glance down through the loitering crowd of girls and men, streaming slowly from east to west and from west to east in gay frocks and ugly cheap summer suits. He was lighting a cigarette further along the path. Two other girls had knocked against him, laughing uproariously as they jerked his match-arm, and made the match send a black smoke stain along the cigarette. Silly fools! He was looking after them. What did he do that for? The one in blue's skirt was three inches lower at the back than the front. And look at her blouse at the shoulder—like a concertina. Oh, well, *she* didn't care; it was nothing to her if he looked at other girls. Still, he'd half stopped when she had looked at him. But then perhaps he hadn't seen . . . of course he'd seen. They liked to keep off a bit—to have another look. Perhaps he was afraid? Not him!

If Jinny thought she minded about Bob, she didn't. A great lout like that, with his snickering hee-hee laugh, in a shop with a lot of other fellows. Got his scissors always

in his waistcoat pocket, too. You could imagine the tape-measure round his neck. (There was a thread of cotton upon her own sleeve.) Besides, the man couldn't keep still for a second: he was always flopping about from one foot to the other, grinning like the cat in the poster. That might be the shop-walker's eye, or corns. Oh no, she didn't care *that!* She moved her arm slightly, to show how little she cared; and then felt again among her hairpins. It was only nervousness that made her do it; girls of her class have no other means of occupying their hands under scrutiny.

He was coming along now, swaggering, cocking an eye in her direction. Saucy little swine! But she liked it. Probably he'd stop beside her, lean up against her. He might drop his cane. She had her handkerchief ready to drop: people knew all about that now, though; girls did that in novelettes. Not nice girls, not . . . ladies. She would not drop her handkerchief. She'd look at him, withdrawing her eyes slowly. He was abreast; should she cough? He

had passed! Oh, well, the next time he came round. . . . She followed him with her eyes; he'd got new clothes on, and a clean handkerchief sticking out of his cuff, like swells had them. Damn Jinny, with her smugness . . . getting Bob. . . . What did he see in the girl, with her little pimply face, and her ready-made shilling-three cotton blouses? . . . Well, he was a clumsy brute himself, hopping about. . . . Couldn't keep still. The way Jinny had looked when she told her! As if he was a prince—with his twenty-three bob a week. *He'd* never get any more—wasn't smart enough. He'd got plenty of *conceit*. . . . conceited, that was what he was. She supposed he hadn't liked her saying that about him last Sunday. "Great clumsy fool!" she had said. "Oh, em I?" he'd said. "Yes, you *are!*" she had said. "Look what you done! Torn my dress!" He'd turned off pretty smart on to Jinny then. They had giggled and snickered together. Potty, they were!

Where had that boy got to? There he

was, at the other side of the stand, leaning on the railings. What were they going to play? Oh, Blue Danube; she knew that. It was lovely! She'd danced that at the old Clerkenwell Town Hall before it was closed. What was that? He'd raised his hat to some girl! It was! He'd started talking to the girl; she was giggling, and turning away. He pressed himself against the railing. . . . She was laughing screamingly. It was one of those girls who'd knocked against him. Little cat! He'd caught hold of her arm. . . .

"Our dance, Miss," said a facetious voice behind her. What was that? She was so intent upon watching that fellow across the other side, that she couldn't take it in. Got a bead necklace, the girl had—get them for a penny! Fancy being attracted by a penny necklace! He *must* be a fool! Little teeny moustache he'd got—wasn't worth calling a moustache. . . .

"Er, good evenin', miss. Warm, ain't it?"

Was that somebody talking to her? She turned abruptly. It was the squint-eyed man.

“Oh, go and boil your face,” Beaty said.

The man was obviously gratified at eliciting some response.

“Beautiful gardens,” he said. “Beautiful music they ’ave ’ere. Pity the trains make such a noise.”

“Oh, lovely,” Beaty said. The eye she could see was clear and honest. The coat was tweed, and respectable. The mouth—well, he’d got nice teeth . . . not a bad-looking fellow.

“Bin wantin’ to speak to you all the evenin’,” he said.

“Taken you a long time to make up your mind,” she told him, but with gentleness.

“You looked so—er—so stand-offish. So lady-like,” said the man. Her heart gave a great leap! Did she?

“Would you like to go inside—have a chair? Much more comfor’able . . . You can hear better . . .”

“Just’s you like,” Beaty said. They moved towards the entrance to the enclosure.

“Lot of people,” said the man.

"Beastly crush," Beaty said, humorously. He laughed.

"*I'm* sure!" he cried. "Oh, well, comin' in?"

At the gate, at the very gate, they met the boy and his two girls. One was on each side of him; he still held the arm of the girl with the bead necklace. She, for her part, looked at Beaty, and then at her friend on the boy's other side. They both laughed, shriekingly, and the boy looked disconcerted.

"Did you see his *eyes!*" the girl said. Beaty flamed with anger. Her new friend turned and smiled genially.

"See that kid?" he said.

"Which? The one with the two other kids?" Beaty asked.

"Wonderful how he does it on fifteen bob a week. He's in the same place as me. Licks the stamps and gets the guvnor's tea ready. Keeps himself, somehow."

Beaty said nothing; only went rather self-consciously round to the unoccupied seats, swinging her arms. Licked the stamps, did

he! Got the guvnor's tea ready! The band started to play a selection from Götterdämmerung.

"Oh, what a row!" said her friend.

"Wonder he don't clean the windows," Beaty said.

"Eh? Oh . . . oh, he *does!*" said the man. Her cup of joy was full. The whippersnapper!

FRANK SWINNERTON