



CHAPTER FIVE -
ENTERTAINMENT

I shall be able to say more on this subject than I did on the last, for I had something to do with this in several ways, so we will start from my early days, when unfortunately because of my sick mother I was always being told to keep quiet. Although music has played quite a part in my life, all that I know about

it I have picked up, never having had any real lessons.

The first Christmas that I still remember, my grandparents, aunts and uncles, as many as could be packed in, came to tea. My mother had had a job to persuade my sisters and me to try and sleep in the afternoon because there was to be a special treat after tea. Our house had been selected for this party because we had a larger room than any of the others. To make more room, even the table was moved out after the meal, and shortly afterwards the clip clop of a pony's trot was heard on the stable yard. Some went outside and others crowded to the window. My father was the first one back in carrying a small cast iron case with a wooden cover like a sewing machine. This he placed on the floor in the middle of the room. The next one brought a brass horn, almost as tall as himself, the third, a fairly high metal stand with a spring and chain hanging from the top, followed by a large wooden case, which was being handled with great care. My uncle's friend had arrived with his phonograph. One or two present had seen one before but most of them had not.

The iron box housed the clockwork motor which in turn, by means of a belt turned a covered roller, on to which the records were slid, these being cylindrical in shape. That is why such a big box was wanted to keep them in.

This particular machine had an extra big horn and that is why it had to stand on the floor, so that it hung freely on the spring and chain, for it was fixed direct on to the sound box, which had to move as the ruby followed along the groove on the record. But what a wonderful thing, bands and singing, and then wonder of wonders, the sound box was taken off and an attachment was put on with a blank record. Two uncles with violins and an aunt with a mandoline tuned up for the owner of the machine to sing "The Mistletoe Bough". They got as close as they could to the end of the horn to make the recording, which was afterwards played back to us.

I expect that the whole programme which we heard that night could be heard now on one "long play" and we should now think it

an awful reproduction, but how wonderful we thought it then.

After seeing these fiddles, I wanted one, but the chances seemed rather remote. After I left school I bought one for ten shillings. I have never played it properly, but I have had a lot of fun out of it, and I've still got it.

During the winter months at this time an aunt who lived close by, went regularly to a Weekly Penny Reading held at the Lecture Hall, for quite a number of people still could not read or write. At these meetings someone would read one of the classics by instalments, followed by a short complete story. To finish the evening someone would sing a song, play an instrument or say a piece of poetry. Sometimes if she thought the odd pieces would interest me, my aunt would take me with her and that was how I first heard pieces from "Great Expectations".

Another form of cheap entertainment was the street musician. There were three at that time who came round regularly. The one that I liked best was the one that was known as the one-legged donkey man; the man had one leg and a donkey pulled his barrel organ. His rounds were mostly outside the pubs, which were open all day and at times when there were enough people about, the young fellows would take the old boy inside and pay for all that he could drink, while they would grind away at the organ and if anyone felt like it they would often dance to the merry music, but the poor old donkey would stand there hour after hour, usually until the pub closed.

They would then put the old man on the front of the organ, turn the mule towards the town, four miles away and tell him to "gee up", which he would do, very often in the dark and I have been told that often after he got home his wife would have to get him indoors and then put the donkey away.

The next one I and the other children were frightened of, for he had no nose, and he wore an oval pad where his nose should have been, held to his face by two leather loops hooked over his ears. He always wore a peaked hat, and I believe he was rather an objectionable fellow, for if he knew of a baby that might be asleep or anyone not too well, he would get right close to a house with his powerful melodian and people would give him something to move on.

The third one came at a later date, between the two wars. He was quite a character, known as Cooney. He dressed in corduroy trousers, with a bandman's hat and tunic, and usually had several days' growth of beard. His instrument was a gramophone. If the weather was fine he used a tradesman's carrier bicycle, with the gramophone on the front carrier, and a box of records on the back. These records were mostly bought at jumble sales. If there was rain about, he used a pram, keeping the machine well under the hood, with the horn sticking

out in the open. The lads often played tricks on poor Cooley. Once they promised him a shilling for so many tunes. After he had obliged he was rewarded with a halfpenny wrapped in tinfoil from a cigarette packet. I don't think they caught him with that one again.

Of course, the village, like other places, has seen and heard a great variety of wandering minstrels. The one party that struck me as being very clever were four men with a drum and three brass instruments on which they played march tunes, and yet they managed to creep, in step, very slowly along in the gutter. Undoubtedly they were enough attraction to be making a good living at it, for after giving their performance through the High Street they moved on in quite a nice motor car.

Before the days of radio and television, when people to a great extent had to make their own entertainment, most of them could do some little thing or other, which made it fairly easy to get a concert going and in the winter there were almost annual events, such as School Concerts, Choir Concerts and Band of Hope and Primrose League with sometimes an extra "special" thrown in.

Apart from the pleasure given at the actual performance, what fun they enjoyed at the practices! Of course, there were the usual upsets at times which had to be got over.

At different times there have been parties who have carried on in a set fashion, sometimes for several years. Some of the early ones were the Coral Society supported by the String Band, which died with the 1914 war. The Coral Society made a come-back through the twenties when they did quite big things for a village group.

About the same time there appeared also The Village Players who on average staged two plays a year. These shows were put on in the Church Institute for three or four nights running and were well patronized, and looked for. After the second war they were started again and went on for several years, but wireless and television, wonderful as they are, had started doing their damage, and because of continued losses this fine group just faded out.

Often small parties would prepare for an item in a concert and it would turn out a success and they would carry on as a party for quite a long time. One such was known as the Black Cat Concert Party, four men and four women, all quite good musicians, who would work up a programme and give a concert in the village, and repeat it in several neighbouring villages.

Some years later a number of men, members of the Church of England Men's Society gave a short sketch at a social gathering, the outcome of which was that they were asked to do a turn to raise funds for the local branch of the British Legion. This they agreed to do, but

they felt that the sketch that they had together was hardly the thing for a public concert, and so they eventually turned themselves into a Nigger Minstrel Troupe, which was in more ways than one, a roaring success.

None of these men were what you might call young and people hardly liked to believe that they could let themselves go for such a performance. Anyway, in three years, fifteen shows gave benefit to different bodies and charities, but like many other things these came to an end with the outbreak of war in 1939, as did also a Male Voice Quartet, which ran for several years, until one of its members went away on service.

I would like here to record a little story of that one, and one other of the four. One night during the black out, the leader ran on to the platform at Charing Cross Station just as the train was moving out. He thought he saw the soldier member get on to the same train and he knew that if it were he, they would both have to change trains later on the journey. When he himself got out, he stood on the platform and whistled the first two lines of "Bobby Shaftoe" and the first two lines of "Buttercup Joe", two songs the Quartet used to sing, and straightway these two old friends found one another again.

For some years the Rover Scouts had a first-class team of Morris Dancers always ready to give a display both at home and in neighbouring towns and villages. It was great fun to see them with their ribbons flying and to hear the strains of the mouth organ, whistle pipe and tambourine playing the "Rigs of Marlow" or "Lads of Burnham", and woe betide the chap who forgot to count, for if he missed a beat he stood a good chance of a crack on the head with his partner's cudgel. I don't know if it is this that scared the lads of to-day, but the Morris Dancers seem to have disappeared for the present, perhaps to come back some other day. I hope they will.

After the second war, special efforts were made to clear a debt on our village Institute. One of these affairs was to be a Harvest Supper and Social. It had been well advertised and nearly all tickets had been sold by the night before the show, when two members of the committee called on me in a terrible state because the fellow responsible for the music had been unable to find any instrumentalists and so they would have to be satisfied with him on a piano. Now although he was good they felt it would be a poor show after the way things had been billed and spoken about, but what could they do? It so happened that only that very morning, a lad that worked with me had told of his father's craze for collecting old time dance records, and of the wonderful electric player to play them on. Unfortunately none of us knew this gentleman, but it was decided that two of us should go and tell him of our plight. After some hesitation, for he had never used anything for an actual dance before, he promised that if we could get his outfit to the hall, we could have all the music we wanted, so we soon found means of transport, and what a success the whole thing was! The outcome was that on

that night the Old Tyme Dance Club was formed, and is still running.

The Harvest Supper became an annual affair and was well patronized for several years, but as time went on it became harder each year to find entertainers, that I am afraid that it is just one more thing that is likely to come to an end.

If ever you feel that you would like to take part in anything to help the world along, never hold back in case you are not good enough. Keep trying and it is surprising how soon you gain confidence and improve. I feel that so many people see and hear on radio and television what they think is the best of everything that they think their own efforts are not worth troubling about. What a pity this is because through this way of thinking the world is often missing pleasure from some latent talent which will never be discovered.

The last years have seen an extraordinary number of fetes on both large and small scales, and there is no doubt that this is a good way of raising money. From experience I am sure that the smaller affairs are far more profitable than the large ones, by proportion. I well remember one extra big effort, which meant weeks of work for many people, and when all was ready it provided a wonderful whole day of pleasure and entertainment, with sports and sideshows, ending with a terrific "Flitch Trial" for the happiest married couple, in the evening. The result was the taking of a goodly sum of money, but unfortunately the expenses came to a little bit more, and the project for which the effort was made had to clear a debt, instead of swelling its funds, and so you see, as in all things you can aim too high.

Although many of the things which I have mentioned in this chapter appear to belong to the past and I have had a little grumble or two about the modern things which have brought the changes about, there is no doubt at all that the gain in the best sense is far greater than the loss, for there are very few who cannot afford at least a radio set and so keep in touch with a whole world of sound and most can see television. Thus events of all kinds are brought into our homes, opening up thoughts and interests which a few years ago would never have entered our heads, and already collections of records and tape-recordings are being built up, which are quite as interesting to go back to as the photograph album has been for some time.