

VILLAGE BANDS.



VILLAGE BAND." The words have a pretty sound, and conjure up, as we write them or speak them, innumerable pretty pictures. We see the village street lit by the soft radiance of a midsummer moon, and faces of young and old looking placidly and smilingly from every window as the sweet strains go float-

ing by, carried by the dancing breeze; or we have a vision of a crisp, frosty, winter night, all spangled with silver on tree and hedgerow, all flashing with sparkling stars, and of children's heads peeping from behind the curtained casement, as the Christmas carol rings out clear and full below, the instruments, as they play the well-known strains, seeming almost to speak the blessed, well-known words that tell of "Peace on earth and glory to God in the highest."

"A village band." We look into our own experiences of the first forming and setting going in a parish of such an institution, and the pictures which rise up before our memory are anything but very fair and pleasant. They are full of labour, and effort, and disappointment, and are as different as anything can well be from the pictures described above. And yet, though our two sets of pictures are so entirely at variance with each other, they are both essentially true. How can this be? we ask. We must look more closely into the subject of village bands before we shall be able to find any satisfactory answer to the question.

The two first requisites for getting up a village band—and indispensable requisites they are—are patience and good temper. If we do not start with a large reserved store of these two qualities we may as well never take the trouble to import from the distant town either a cornet or a drum. The kindness of rich inhabitants and neighbours of the parish provides the funds for the purchase of the instruments, a number of men and lads come forward, eager and ready each to take his part, rules are made, and promises of entire obedience to them are given with lightning swiftness, and the whole matter seems as easy as winding a baby's ringle around your finger. For a few evenings the practisings go off as merrily as a ball in fairyland or a chime of New Year's bells, but suddenly we begin to feel that a change is come. The euphonium player takes a strange and unaccountable dislike for his own instrument and a fancy for a cornet, which the young man who holds that latter is very unwilling to satisfy; the tenor-horn has fallen into the hands of a youth who, after having given you the trouble of getting half a dozen different instruction-books for him, all at once finds out that he has not the slightest talent or inclination for music; the baritone appears at the practising about every seventh night; the performer on the bombardine, though he has a musical ear, has a most inharmonious temper, which is always upon the jangle and the wrangle with one or other of his brother-bandsmen; the boy who plays the triangle is found, just when he ought to be accentuating a *staccato* movement, standing on his head, striking the air with his heels instead of the tinkling brass with his hands.

This is no over-drawn picture, as anyone will know and own who has been engaged in the management of a village band; therefore, the work needs, as we have said above, patience and good temper, and, moreover,

perseverance and courage under disappointment, and strength of will that laughs at difficulties. If a young lady—and it is indeed in its humanising elevating character quite a young lady's task—takes upon her to cultivate the musical ear and taste of a country neighbourhood by the establishment of a village band, she must be quite prepared, before she reaches any lasting success, to see the whole fabric that she has raised with the utmost pains and care fall in a moment, so that she will have to go hither and thither again, seeking for more suitable but raw material. Again and again she will believe that she has attained her point, and that she has founded a band that will play on melodiously for many and many a year, and again and again the whole thing will melt away like a morning mist, and she will perpetually find herself, with regard to her undertaking, just where she began.

All this should be borne in mind by young enthusiasts in the matter before they take a village band in hand. It is not an institution that can be founded on a few vague, æsthetic fancies about cultivating the masses. When, however, a lady in some position in a parish has looked coolly at the realistic, practical side of the enterprise—when she has resolutely made up her mind to face all discouragements and difficulties, and go forward in spite of them, she has, in truth, undertaken something that will help to lift up her generation. Music is never a more brightening, sweetening, softening influence than among English working men.

Having thus formed a full and earnest purpose with regard to carrying on steadfastly what we have begun, because our subject is a fair and high one, the first thing we have to do when we set about establishing a village band is to frame a code of rules for its members. The wording of these rules should be as simple and unambiguous as possible, and such as cannot allow of the smallest chance of a double interpretation. They should be few in number, and not too long; yet, at the same time, they should be very clearly defined. The rural working man's mind always likes things to be put very plainly before it. They should not, however, go into small particulars, but should leave a broad margin to allow for different characters and different employments. This latter point is very essential; for a bandsman who has been working all day at some hard field labour, or some trying trade, needs every allowance to be made for him.

It is difficult to draw out these rules exactly in a paper like the present, for different country districts will require, naturally, different arrangements with regard to their village bands, such as will suit the habits of the neighbourhood, and the people, and the kind of work in which the men who are to form the band are employed. There are two great points, however, to be kept in mind in forming all village band regulations in all country districts alike—one is to let the band be, as much as possible, an amusement and relaxation for the bandsmen, and not a thing of labour and trouble; the other is that the village band should be, in some measure at least, a help in teaching sobriety and high morality in the village.

On these two subjects, with regard to a village band, we want to say a few more earnest words before we go on any further. In the first place, we must remember that the performers in our village band are not professional musicians who can give up the greater part of the day to their art, but working men weary with toil. Their practisings must, therefore, be made as attractive as possible to them; they should have, in winter, a warm, comfortable room provided for their evening band meetings, and in summer they should find their music hall in some honeysuckle-scented lane. The music chosen for them

should not be too difficult, but should be of an interesting, sympathetic character—such as some pathetic Scotch air, or an Irish melody, full of bubbling laughter; or a grand old psalm tune of the class which rang out from a meeting of the early Reformers into the silent night, when it was a crime in the land for Christian men to worship God in spirit and in truth. The time appointed for such practising to last should, also, not be too long; and it is a great help and encouragement to the village band if now and then ladies and gentlemen will attend their meetings and speak words of praise or gentle criticism, showing the men that those of higher culture than themselves are interested in their musical efforts, however rude they may be.

The other point we have mentioned should be considered very gravely, namely, the band being made to exercise some real, high moral influence in the neighbourhood. To do this we must have strict rules, and stick to them inexorably, to the effect that no man of intemperate habits or immoral character, however great his musical talent may be, can become a member of our village band; also, that any marked wrong-doing in a bandsman will turn him out of the musical brotherhood at once—even though he be the most proficient player in the whole band. To be taken into the village band should be well known by the whole parish to be as good as a written testimonial vouching for a man's temperance, honesty, and respectability. In this way, to become a village bandsman will be regarded as entering into an order of merit, and the band itself will be a strong power working for God's cause, independently of any lesser good it may do in the way of cultivating and polishing the minds and manners of the people.

As to a village band attaining to any real proficiency in music, this can only be done by steady, constant practice; and steady, constant practice, with a village band, means attendance on practising nights. Working men and lads, however fond they may be of music, and however real their anxiety may be to make advances in its study, have seldom any opportunity during the day of touching an instrument; their only leisure time is the evening, and then, unless they can be prevailed on to attend the general band practice, their musical efforts will usually be of the most desultory and unsatisfactory character. How to get village bandsmen to such practising is not such an easy matter as it may at first appear. Working men, when they come in from hard manual toil, often wet through, are frequently somewhat difficult to move from their own fireside; and the pleasure of even a musical evening will not always bring them again outside their own doors. This is why we should especially strive to make the band practisings attractive by means of a bright, comfortable room, and lively, interesting, popular music; and this is the way we should endeavour to make our bandsmen see that, without diligent practice, no success in any art can be attained even by the most gifted.

A village band should not, and must not, be a mere decorative and æsthetic appendage to rural life; it should be made of some real, substantial use in a parish. It must be a strong influence in the cause of temperance, both in giving rational, healthy amusement to performers and listeners, and in making the working man feel that intellectual pleasures are better than mere animal enjoyment; at every village festival it should strike, as it were, the key-note of harmless joy, with which everything and everyone should strive to keep in tune; it should be able to earn a little money by playing at respectable entertainments, which will pass into the pockets of its members, and add to home comforts; it should be the centre of a right sort of happi-

ness in the village, and happiness and pleasure of a really healthy, genial sort would be a power for good among our rural poor, nay, is a power, even at the present time, in some parishes, such as no words can describe.

The common complaint with regard to village bands is, that they can never be got to hold together for any length of time. The best remedy for this evil is a clever, intelligent, placid-tempered band-leader, who has the peculiar faculty, possessed here and there by certain individuals among working men and boys, of swaying his companions, and making them cling to him as if he were covered with some adhesive material. If such a man as this can be found to take the leadership of the village band—and all those used to daily going in and out among working men know that such men do exist in their class—the band will be as firm and compact as the pieces in a Florentine mosaic. If no such leader is to be obtained, the only course is to be contented with a fresh relay of bandsmen coming in whenever the old members give up; there are always sure to be plenty of men and lads ready to try their hands at music. Thus, though frequent change of members will prevent the band from reaching much musical skill, it will, at least, be doing good work in giving the men rational amusement, and furnishing them with something else to think of besides what is connected with the mere exercise of their physical strength in manual labour.

There is a comic side in the management of a village band which may well, without at all injuring the earnest aspect of the matter, wake up a little good-natured laughter and fun. Come into the room to-day where our village band are assembled for a practice, and watch

them and listen to them. What a wondrous important gravity is there in the bronzed, weather-beaten faces as they take up their instruments! Into what strange words—that are like no language under the sun save, possibly, the language of the undiscovered islands—do they transform the names of familiar airs and pieces! How do they keep time with a vengeance, stamping it mightily and vigorously with their nailed boots! The leader of the band indulges in all sorts of long, grand, musical expressions, which his fellow-bandsmen cannot understand simply because they never heard them in their lives, and which no one, most skilled in music, could understand, simply because they do not exist in any known musical vocabulary. These terms are, however, if not comprehended, much admired by his followers, and add greatly to his *prestige* among them.

The highest object of attraction in the whole band, the object towards which all eyes turn with devout admiration, the object on which every village lad sets his affections far more than on cornet or euphonium, is the big drum—the big drum, which was once in a regimental band, and carries what is called in military parlance “its honours,” in the shape of the names of all the battles in which the regiment to which it belonged fought and distinguished itself. Seven-eighths of the boys in the village are certain that they have a remarkable talent for music as they gaze fondly at that drum; the deafest old granny in the parish declares, with pride unspeakable, that she has actually caught the sound of it; the very toddling babies regard it with a kind of loving awe, and are never so happy as when they are allowed to caress it tenderly with

their chubby hands. Look at the solemn dignity of the drummer now in office as he performs his part; he appears to have at least the welfare of the whole county resting on the amount of noise he can produce. No one can say he is wanting in energy, whatever other accusations sensitive ears may bring against him.

The brass instruments of our village band are as bright as if they were silver trumpets; each bandsman has the especial charge of his own instrument, and regards its polishing as a matter in which his personal reputation is concerned. Among our band rules there should always be one which forbids the village band going anywhere to play without the leave of the committee who are appointed to manage it, and this law will be a great safeguard to these same instruments, preventing them from being carried to a place where they can be in danger of rough treatment. The care of the instruments of a village band, though it seems a smaller point, is one to be attended to, for some of the men, at first, hardly know even how to handle them.

Finally, let us say to all those who are thinking of establishing a village band that it is an undertaking which needs courage and perseverance, for there are many difficulties connected with it that do not belong to other such institutions in a country parish. If, however, it is managed judiciously, if the founder is brave and has a strong will, and the band is well fenced round with rules which will entirely prevent any possibility of its leading to waste of time or intemperance, then it is a thing which will certainly bring a blessing with it, and which will help to spread light and melody through the land.

ALICE KING.

SEVEN YEARS FOR RACHEL; OR, WELSH PICTURES SKETCHED FROM LIFE.

By ANNE BEALE.

CHAPTER V. MARKETERS.

THE events of the past weeks have been full of moment to Rachel. She has refused decidedly, and with somewhat of her father's obstinacy, the hand of her red-haired admirer, even though he is the son of a respectable farmer, and will have plenty of money. She has given her father to understand, without at all meaning to do so, that she thinks William the very nicest young man in the world, and has been seen to shed tears when he talked of “listing for a soldier, like his father before him.” William has been more kind and attentive to her than ever, and, in spite of the jeers of his mother, the insinuations of his sister, and the anger of his father, persists in visiting Jackey Bach as often as he can make an excuse for so doing. He is frequently obliged to put his ingenuity to the test to find



“THEY PAUSE ON THEIR WAY.”