

THE TWO TROMBONES.

BY F. ROBSON.

Mr. Whiffles—the respected parent of our hero, Mr. Adolphus Whiffles—was an opulent Berkshire farmer, who, before retiring from his business and leaving it to his son, fancied that a visit to the great metropolis would have the effect of sharpening the wits of that amiable youth, an operation of which that young gentleman stood greatly in need. The son jumped at the idea, especially when he learned he was to set forth on his travels alone. With the parental blessing and his purse well filled, Mr. Whiffles, junior, duly arrived in the metropolis, and installed himself in economical quarters in Savoy Street. The theaters, of course, occupied a large share of Mr. Whiffles' attention during his stay there, and the neighborhood of stage-doors afforded him a vast amount of satisfaction. The sight of "professionals" in their everyday costume was to him a source of great gratification, and his delight when he made the acquaintance of a prominent member of the orchestra of the Royal Dash Theater exceeded all bounds. He vowed eternal friendship for him on the spot, and there and then ratified the agreement by entertaining his new acquaintance at a recherche supper at the Albion. Our story opens when Mr. Whiffles and his companion—Mr. O'Leary by name—had been almost inseparable for the space of six weeks. With pain Mr. Whiffles had lately observed an expression of settled melancholy upon Mr. O'Leary's expressive countenance, and had resolutely determined to divine the cause. "You are ill?" said our hero one evening, after they had supped at the hostelry above mentioned, and were quaffing various "whiskies hot" to promote digestion. Mr. O'Leary sighed, shook his head sadly, and emptied his glass by way of a reply. "Your supper has disagreed with you—you have eaten too much," continued Mr. Whiffles tenderly. "It isn't the supper that worries me," observed his companion; "it's the substitute." This mysterious answer puzzled Mr. Whiffles. He thought it over seriously, then gave it up in despair, and demanded an explanation. Mr. O'Leary vigorously puffed at his cigar and proceeded to enlighten Mr. Whiffles. It appeared from Mr. O'Leary's account that it was customary in the Royal Dash Theater to allow various members of the orchestra to absent themselves from time to time from their posts in order to attend concerts or other entertainments, on the condition that they provided efficient substitutes to fulfill their ordinary duties. As a rule, these substitutes were not hard to find, but Mr. O'Leary confessed, with tears in his eyes, that although he had searched high and low, for some unaccountable reason he could find no one able or willing to supply his place at the theater, while he was absent to fulfill a most profitable engagement he had accepted to play at a fashionable West End concert the ensuing evening. Without a moment's hesitation, Mr. Whiffles threw himself into the breach and proffered his services. "Stuff!" replied Mr. O'Leary, rudely, "what do you know about music?" Mr. Whiffles couldn't tell. He was quite certain about what he didn't know, but that he refrained from mentioning. There was a painful pause. Mr. O'Leary smoked silently for some time, now and then darting a searching glance upon the anxious face of Mr. Whiffles, as if he were revolving some great scheme in the innermost recesses of his own mind, but as yet scarcely saw the manner in which it could be carried out. Suddenly, "I have it. Thanks, Whiffles, my boy. I accept your generous offer. You shall be my substitute," said Mr. O'Leary. To say that Mr. Whiffles was delighted would but feebly express the state of his mind. He grasped Mr. O'Leary's hand and shook it fervently. He trembled already with excitement. His proudest hopes were about to be realized. He would be admitted behind the scenes of a theater. Words failed to convey any idea of his feelings, as he lent a willing ear to Mr. O'Leary, who proceeded to give him the necessary instructions. In the first place, Mr. O'Leary pointed out there were two trombone-players in the orchestra of the Royal Dash Theater, he himself being one, and that for the especial guidance of Mr. Whiffles he would summarily state the case as follows, premising that after the rising of the curtain on the first piece a performance upon the two trombones heralded the approach of the villain of the piece. Further, his (Mr. O'Leary's) experience induced him to believe that in a crowded assembly one trombone would probably make as much noise as two; and that all Mr. Whiffles had to do, after announcing himself as Mr. O'Leary's substitute, would be to take his seat in the orchestra, and, when the curtain rose, carefully watch the proceedings of the other trombone player, and imitate his every movement; so that, in reality, one trombone would make all the noise, although apparently two were being played. Lastly, he advised Mr. Whiffles to be careful and to mind what he was about, as the leader was a—! Soon afterwards the friends left the Albion and proceeded on their several ways—his friend and companion already more than half repenting his rashness in embarking in the undertaking. The sombre shades of twilight were enveloping the metropolis as with a shroud, when, carrying Mr. O'Leary's trombone in his hand, Mr. Whiffles might have been observed wearily picking his way through the purlieus of the theatre, endeavouring to find the stage-entrance. Two or three snallow-faced gentlemen were smoking short pipes in front of the entrance, and occasionally a lady or gentleman passed hurriedly in, evidently under the impression that they were behind their time, but a glance at the clock in the hall appeared to reassure them, as they made their way more leisurely towards their respective dressing-rooms. Upon reference to his watch, Mr. Whiffles found that the doors had only just been opened, and he therefore had some leisure to look about him. He loitered at the door for some time, wondering, as the various members of the company made their appearance, who this was, and who that could possibly be, until a small, but uncommonly sharp boy, plucked him by the sleeve and said: "You'd better make haste—they're goin' to ring in." Mr. Whiffles then became aware that he was almost alone. Without having the faintest idea of the meaning of "ringing in," he mechanically followed the small boy down a gloomy passage, tumbled down a few steps, picked himself up, and found himself upon the stage. He had hardly time to cast a hurried glance upon the novel, not to say dreary ob-

jects by which he was surrounded, when an elderly individual, in a white beard, and whose shirt-front appeared to be plentifully bespangled with snuff, beckoned the boy. "Tom," said he, "go into the music-room and ask Mr. Lovejoy for my copy of 'Old King Cole.'" The boy at once complied. Rightly conjecturing that the music-room was the place wherein the musicians assembled previous to making their appearance in the orchestra, Mr. Whiffles followed the boy down a score or so of stairs, to the great detriment of his shins, into a scantily-furnished apartment, situated immediately beneath the stage, wherein he found several gentlemen composedly tuning their instruments. Upon hearing Mr. Lovejoy, the leader, addressed by name, Mr. Whiffles nervously introduced himself as Mr. O'Leary's substitute. "Very good," said Mr. Lovejoy; "he's told you everything, I suppose?" Mr. Whiffles bowed assentingly, and darted a piercing glance into every corner of the apartment in search of the other trombone. Horror! He wasn't there! The man upon whom he solely depended absent! What was to be done? Retreat was out of the question; as, while he was contemplating flight, a small bell-sounded, and the musicians proceeded to take their places in the orchestra. Mr. Whiffles, still bearing the fatal trombone, despairingly followed, and ere long found himself in the presence of the public. The novelty of his situation so confused him that he, for a moment, seated himself in the chair belonging to Mr. Lovejoy, and was received with a prodigious outburst of enthusiasm, the audience supposing him to be the talented leader himself. This mistake was soon retrieved by the appearance of the veritable leader, who muttered something under his breath by no means complimentary to our hero, and motioned him angrily to the seat usually occupied by Mr. O'Leary. The audience, perceiving the mistake, expressed their opinion of Mr. Whiffles in caudal and unmistakable terms, as he carefully made his way to the spot indicated by the irate conductor. After trying to reduce to something like order the sheets of music upon the stand before him, Mr. Whiffles regained sufficient courage to look around him. The house was packed from floor to ceiling; everybody was on the tiptoe of expectation and sundry anxious voices appertaining to impatient "gods" implored the musicians to strike up at once and appease their anxiety. Again the small bell tinkled. Mr. Lovejoy tapped his desk—raised his baton—looked at each side of him, and—stopped. He whispered the First Fiddle, then left his seat and the orchestra. Mr. Whiffles asked his neighbor what this might portend; and was informed, in reply, that Puffer, the other Trombone, hadn't as yet put in an appearance. "Couldn't they do without him?" asked Mr. Whiffles—devoutly hoping in his heart of hearts they couldn't. "Certainly not," was the reply. "Wouldn't the big drum do as well?" inquired Mr. Whiffles. His neighbor regarded him with some surprise, smiled, and continued: "Do without him! how can they? Don't you know that you and he begin the moment the curtain rises, to bring on old Russett, the heavy man? He couldn't come on without his music, you know; as he appears at the back at first—then crosses the mountains from left to right—then from right to left, and finally comes down left upon the stage, where he expresses a variety of emotions in pantomime, and all to your music." At these words Mr. Whiffles resigned all hope, and was mentally calculating the dangers to which he would be exposed if he leaped into the stalls, from thence into the pit, and fought his way out of the theater; when the leader returned, an ominous frown upon his brow, followed by a short, fat, pale-faced gentleman, apparently of foreign extraction, who carried a trombone under his left arm. Joy! Mr. Whiffles felt a man again. This, then, was Puffer! Mr. Whiffles remembered his instructions, and watched the new comer attentively, who, upon his part, appeared to regard him with the uttermost concern. Mr. Whiffles had occasion to shift his trombone—Puffer did likewise. Mr. Whiffles felt for his handkerchief—Mr. Puffer followed his example. All this seemed very mysterious, and Mr. Whiffles was lost in wonderment when the overture commenced. Luckily, the trombones were not wanted until the commencement of the drama. The overture ceased. "Now, look out," observed Mr. Whiffles' neighbor—"it's you now." Mr. Whiffles mechanically raised the instrument to his lips, keeping a steadfast gaze the while upon the proceedings of Mr. Puffer, who did his best to stare Mr. Whiffles out of countenance. Mr. Lovejoy looked round, and seeing the Trombones perfectly ready, awaited the rising of the curtain. It was an agonizing moment. The silence was positively painful. One might have heard a pin drop. The small bell was heard again. Mr. Lovejoy tapped his desk, and the curtain rose—in solemn silence! Mr. Lovejoy began beating time slowly, and had even accomplished a few strokes before he realized the fact. Turning round to ascertain the meaning of this extraordinary circumstance, his surprise and bewilderment may well be imagined at perceiving the two trombone-players hard at work, distending their cheeks to their utmost capacity, nervously manipulating their instruments, and producing not a sound! And the most unaccountable thing was that they never took their eyes off one another. Mr. Lovejoy was transfixed with amazement. "This is very strange," thought Mr. Whiffles, "I wonder when that fellow is going to begin!" The little bell tinkled again and again. Mr. Russett stepped upon the stage with some amount of dignity, and left it without any, under the impression that he was a trifle too soon. The stage-manager, a gentleman of excitable temperament and much addicted to the use of passionate language, who played one of the principal parts in the piece, rushed from his room, discharged upon the spot an inoffensive "super" who, unfortunately, happened to cross his path, went, half-a-dozen at a time, down the score or so of rickety stairs, at the imminent hazard of breaking his neck, and appearing at the little door under the stage that led into the orchestra, demanded in unmeasured terms what the very bad word—Mr. Lovejoy meant by such conduct, and why the excessively rude observation—he didn't go on? Mr. Lovejoy was too astounded to reply. He could only point in silent wonder, to the two Trombones. There they sat, puffing and blowing vigorously, but with no result. The stage-manager gesticulated violently, and nearly had a fit. The audience, unable to compre-

hend what was going on before their eyes, hissed loudly; and, finally, the curtain fell. Then Mr. Lovejoy gave vent to his feelings. He leaped from his seat, and rushed towards Mr. Whiffles, who, panting with exhaustion after his unrelaxed exertions, was wiping the perspiration from his face, wondering what on earth was going to happen next. No sooner, however, did he perceive the angry Conductor advancing towards him than, with an intuitive perception that something unpleasant was about to occur, he made a precipitate rush through the little door, and sought safety under the stage, hotly pursued by Mr. Lovejoy, who opportunely came across the foreign gentleman quietly sneaking away, and fell upon him tooth and nail. The foreign gentleman, being choleric, knocked Mr. Lovejoy down. Mr. Lovejoy, being by no means deficient in pluck, regained the perpendicular, and—in the language of the Ring—let the foreign gentleman "have it." That individual next seized the astonished Whiffles, and endeavored to drag him before Mr. Lovejoy, in order that he might undergo condign punishment, when the foreign gentleman slipped; they both fell, and the two trombone-players mysteriously disappeared. They had fallen down an unused well under the stage, Mr. Whiffles undermost. There being but little water, they were soon extricated, and, fortunately, no bones were broken. The two gentlemen—after a rather exciting interview with the stage-manager—were shortly afterwards permitted to take their departure. Mr. O'Leary, next day, was duly informed of the disaster, and lost his situation. The same fate befell the unfortunate Puffer, who, it appeared upon inquiry, was really laboring under some severe indisposition that threatened to confine him to his bed; and, being naturally unwilling to lose his salary, he provided a substitute, like Mr. Whiffles, utterly unable to play, and to whom he gave, in effect, instructions almost identical with those given to our hero by Mr. O'Leary. Mr. Whiffles returned to the home of his ancestors a sadder and a wiser man. He has never been to a theatre since, and never thinks without a shudder of his terrible adventure connected with the Trombones.

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