

Whittaker Burnham's Musicale

By HUGH PENDEXTER

It was the first phonograph to come to Peavy's Mills, and its advent caused something of a stir. The town clerk had just characterised it as "oureligious," and was endeavouring in vague asperation to prove that its only mission was to play "dance music." The selectman and the G. A. R. veteran, as they filled pipes from his plug, took no positive stand, but readily milted with him in asking—Why had Whittaker Burnham bought it?

The selectman for the tenth time repeated, "How came a man so sot an' stern in his natur' as Whittaker ter go in for talkin' machines? I always s'posed he lived only ter double th' dollars."

"While I don't approve of his buyin' it," drawled the town clerk, "I guess I've found th' reason. He wants ter chuck up his wife. Ever since their boy Bob ran away, ten years ago, she's been gloomy an' depressed like. Whittaker, close as he is, would buy anything ter rouse her up. But dang a talkin' machine!"

"Yas," observed the stiff-legged veteran, who revelled in a local reputation of having supplied the brains behind every campaign in the Civil War, "they're mighty peculiar. I guess no one knows what they really be. I remember when Grant was askin' my advice about th' Wilderness—"

"A talkin' machine is peculiar only in its disposition ter be cussed," amended the town clerk heavily. "They work simple enough. Th' principle is—wal, ye know how they condense milk? It's just th' same."

"Jest like canned an' preserved stuff," cried the selectman, loudly, his eyes dilating as he absorbed the theory.

The veteran's jaw flapped loosely as he listened to this simple exposition, but the clerk received the interruption coldly. "As I was sayin'," he continued, "it's like condensin' milk. Ter say music is canned ain't ter th' pint. It's more'n that. It's condensed." And he surveyed the selectman defiantly. Then, swinging his chair to face the open-mouthed veteran and ignoring the selectman, he gravely elucidated. "Ye see, they squeeze th' music inter th' smallest compass an' trim th' edges. When th' machine starts goin' it kind of expands, meller like, an' ta-ta-ta-lala, an' there ye have it!"

The veteran ruffled his sparse locks dubiously, and tried closing one eye in a futile essay to get the proper perspective, while the selectman frowned at the stove and shifted the conversation by reminding the others of the original question. "But ye ain't give no answer ter th' invitation. I was asked by Whittaker ter call here an' invite yer up ter the house ter-night ter hear th' contraption play for th' first time. Mp errand's done. What d'ye say?"

"Don't think I'll go," declared the clerk, biting a penholder meditatively. "It's unmaral."

"Wal, I think I'll accept," confessed the veteran sheepishly. "I don't expect ter enjoy it much, but Whittaker might feel put out if we all kept away. I remember when General—"

"Ye see," expostulated the clerk, sorrowfully, "they can teach a machine ter say anything. Who knows what this one has been taught?"

"By Judas!" cried the selectman, his dull eyes bulging. "I know now what old Burnham is up ter. His wife is failin' everyday because nothin' is ever heard of thub. Whittaker'd rather lose all his money than his wife. He's goin' ter talk

into this thing an' teach it ter cry out that a reward will be paid ter anybody furnishin' him with a clue ter Bob's whereabouts. Machines in every city will be rippin' it off, an' somebody is sure ter hear th' offer."

The town clerk's eyes rolled wide in amazed envy as he ponderously digested the suggestion, and his pipe grew cold as he regretted that he had not advanced the theory. The veteran, too, he loathed to behold, was impressed to the point of stinpor. Naturally, it all irritated the clerk, and as soon as he could group his features into a sneer he sought to turn the tide by facing the veteran and felicitating that individual by earnestly inquiring, "Lemme see, what was it General Scott said to ye when ye called on him in Washington?"

But the selectman was not to be side-tracked so easily, and before the veteran could delight in a long-drawn-out recital he babbled aloud in self-admiration, and with much gusto repeated the salient points of his conclusion. As the clerk could not endure any relegation to the second rank, he closed the situation by loudly banging his desk-cover and proclaiming that it was time to go for the mail. But even after he had ushered his guests outside, the selectman talked on, and the veteran, with mouth agape, forgot reminiscences in listening.

The clerk, halting on the top step, viewed the two in sullen silence, for a moment. Then further to evince his position he bleated: "No, I shan't go up ter-night. I don't believe in them contraptions."

II.

Old man Burnham, in the meanwhile, was experiencing considerable difficulty with the "contraption," or seemingly so. His wife had paid but scant attention as he unpacked it, and his mouth pulled down at the corners as he furtively noted her abstraction.

"I guess I can never fix this horn on, now I hought th' dangedd thing," he grumbled.

"Let me help you, dear," she offered listlessly, and his frosty gaze burned warm as he saw the colour mount her cheeks in her deft endeavour to aid him.

"Why, you've turned this screw 'way in," she cried triumphantly, as with her scissors she remedied his blunder. "Of course you couldn't fix it with the screw that way." And quickly the horn was secured in place.

"We'll enjoy this, I'm a thinkin'," he observed genially, still studying her carworn face from the tail of his eye.

"Enjoy it? Oh, yes; we'll enjoy it," Mrs Burnham repeated vacantly. "Ten year ago yesterday it was. Ten long weary years!"

"Why d'ye always hark back ter that?" he cried in despair, and his black-veined hand shook as he arranged the records. He knew it was foolish to expect her to forget. He had hoped, however, that the talking-machine would by some mysterious means operate to arouse her brooding mind, even if but for a day. He had purposely tampered with the screw to give her a petty victory, and now she was cast back amid her bitter cogitations again, and her eyes neither saw him nor the toy as she sat by the window and propped her chin in one thin hand.

It was her favourite seat; for from

that particular window she could watch the brown sweep of dusty road until it dodged behind the curve. On winter nights she had sat there, oblivious to his presence and with the curtains pulled behind her, so she might pierce the darkness.

"Why d'ye always hark back ter that?" he repeated weakly, now inviting what he had fought so hard to avoid.

"To Bob?" she inquired wearily. "That what you mean, Whittaker?"

"Yas, I mean Bob," he returned fiercely. "Ain't I yer husband? Ain't I ter be considered at all? Don't I count for nothin'?"

"Give me back my boy, then!" ebe eriel, rising from her chair and stretching her arms to the window. "Give me back my boy!" Overpowered by her emotions, she sank in a limp heap and sobbed, "Oh, Bob! Bob!"

Her husband pressed his throat and his voice was husky as he asked: "I guess ye'll always hold it against me because Bob went away, won't ye?"

She ceased her weeping by a mighty effort and sought to smooth out her face as she replied: "I know you've spent money and time, Whittaker, in trying to find him. But—my son! my son!"

"It's killin' her," he mumbled to the machine. "It's killin' her, an' she blames me." As if hoping she would refute this conclusion, he patted her gray hair with clumsy gentleness and whispered: "I guess, little woman, ye ain't got much use for me."

"You did all you could," she replied, not turning her head.

"But ye blame me for his goin' away?"

"Bring him back." "Ye think I was too snug with my money an' too hard on him because he didn't take to farm work. Ye think if I'd treated him different he'd never quit us."

"Bring him back. If dead, bring his body back." Then meeting his gaze openly, with her face seamed and white, she moaned: "He is to be found somewhere, dead or alive. Bring him back."

"Ye blame me for all," he muttered. "An' maybe I was too harsh. But I've tried my best to find him. I'll begin

again ter-morrow. I'll go ter town an' hire more detectives."

"Give me my boy, Whittaker," she whimpered, again bowing her head in her hands. "I guess I'm all unstrung, but I want him. Oh, how I want him!"

The fierce, hungry light in her staring eyes, now looking at him through the hot tears, caused him humbly to retreat and ponder in awe over the mighty weight of a mother's love. "I'll find him if it takes every inch of land I own," he promised more calmly, his iron jaw set at its most stubborn notch.

"Forgive me, dear, if I seem out of sorts"—her mood was sadly gentle now.—"but when I think of the long years and in the night seem to hear his sweet voice singing the old songs about the house, I know I must have him back soon, or it will be too late. Don't you remember how he used to sing?"

"Yas," he groaned, "but ye can't feel jest th' same toward me till he comes back." In declaring this he hoped she would reassure him.

She bit her lip for a moment and looked down; then raising her head she said simply: "You've done your best, and I shouldn't dwell on why Bob left home. He did wrong to wring my heart. Yet I can't forget your last words to him. I—no, nothing can ever be the same with me till he comes home—till he comes home."

He bowed his head as if receiving a sentence and his face was haggard as he resumed adjusting the machine. She blamed him and always would. Had the boy died, she would have remained the same loving helpmate. But now she was changed. He loved the boy, he told himself, and only God could know the washings his soul had received from useless tears, as in moments of piracy he gave way to his grief. He had been harsh. He had spoken words at that last parting the memory of which would always upbraid him. He felt guilty. To his neighbours he always presented the same hard face, but in his heart he ever hungered for the boy.

A movement at the window caused him to turn. She had risen and was shading her eyes in an effort to scan



"Come out, Bobbie!"