

The opening pages of
The Piano Teacher
By David Pennant

Part The First

A Bomb in the Piano Stool

Why on earth, Bruce Winter asked himself, was he still travelling by train, in this day and age? Then he spotted the unintended pun and smiled. On earth indeed!

The truth was, he felt lonely. All these other people rushing to work looked so full of purpose and ready for the day. It must be nice to feel fulfilled. He was almost unnoticeable in this crowd, he thought to himself, trundling along in a stopping service, sitting by the window. These slam door trains ought to have been phased out years ago! But still, they served his purpose, and not just his; the carriage was surprisingly full. Perhaps the small sum the government paid you to travel did attract a few people. At all events, the 0745 stopping train to London would go on running for several years yet.

He was one among many, he reflected. As to his age, he was neither old nor young. Anyway, what did age matter? Nobody would look twice at him, he reckoned, jammed in next door to a complete stranger, clutching his improving literature, despite his jet black hair, of which he was secretly rather proud. They might have wondered at somebody taking the trouble to bring a book to read on a journey which lasted just six minutes, but most people were not observant enough to notice that he got in and out at consecutive stations. They were too busy looking out of the windows.

They had good reason. It was extraordinary seeing the teenagers swooping about like swallows in the sky. It did look such fun! But even more remarkable, to Bruce, was the speed with which it had all come about. Who could have foretold that the two discoveries would come out of the blue, and so close to each other, that would make the move into the skies possible?

Infinite energy! Well, virtually infinite. Nobody had even dreamt that such a thing was possible. It was ridiculous, really. His granddad had told him so often that the world's reserves of fossil fuels would run out some day, and that they should be carefully preserved, that it had become a deep-rooted part of his thinking. That was the real reason why he did not run a car. People thought that it was because his piano teacher's income would not allow it, but really, it was out of concern for the environment. "Preserve some of the world's precious resources for your grandchildren!" He could just hear his granddad saying it. Not that he was ever likely to have any grandchildren, but that was another matter, and it was best not to go down that path so early in the day.

Now there was no reason to worry about the oil and coal reserves. Fossil fuels not just by name, but by nature too.

Then the discovery of anti-gravity! And by the same people who had cracked the energy business. That seemed to suggest that the two were linked in some way. Anyway, you had to hand it to those boys. Although the energy breakthrough was out in the open, they had managed to keep their anti-gravity invention secret even to the stage of marketing the flying suits. It really did not seem possible to believe that nobody could discover how they worked. All over the world, the finest brains were taking the suits apart as best they could, and coming up with... nothing! It was not just intriguing; it was the ultimate mystery of all time, Bruce reckoned. You would have thought that somebody somewhere would have been able to work out how it was done.

You also had to admire their marketing. The earliest suits had been clumsy affairs, but the newest ones did not just have automatic temperature control, keeping you warm in Winter and cool in Summer, but they could also be tailored to you for a perfect fit. How wise they were to keep the price down to a level where the teenagers could afford them. That was always going to have been

the mass market. Although there was a lot of jealousy about against Skywear (what a good name), it was limited to those scientists and engineers who wished they could have been the ones to scoop the prize. The young people had nothing but praise for Skywear, which must be just what they wanted.

Funny how he had assumed the inventors were men. Perhaps they were women? Whoever it was, they certainly understood how to make the girls look shapely. Take that one for instance, doing loop the loops near the carriage window. He supposed the young people liked to come down low, in order to be seen. Why, wasn't that Araminta? Yes, it was! Impulsively, he waved, then immediately regretted it. Oh dear, she had seen him, and waved back vigorously. Then she shot off skywards to join a group of friends. They made off into the middle distance.

That was a foolish thing to do. He looked around inside the carriage, to see if anyone else had noticed the interchange between them. A young woman sitting diagonally opposite him caught his eye, and smiled. She had seen. He smiled back. He had noticed her before. She had a book like him; that was curious.

It was time to get out. He was always worried that he would get carried away in his thoughts and miss the station. It had not happened yet, but there was always a first time. Daydreaming was deeply embedded in his nature; he had developed sufficient self-knowledge to have grasped that! He must try and stay focussed enough each day to get off the train.

It was an eight minute walk to the school. Down the few steps from the station entrance, across the forecourt, and into the little alley. So far, the occasional cyclists coming the other way had always slowed down, but Bruce was anticipating a collision one day, so he marched quickly along peering ahead, ready to fall backwards into the hedge if required. Today there was no incident, and he was able to step through the gap in the wire netting behind the bike shed and make his way to the music block. Somewhat unofficial, maybe, but it did save going all round by the gate, and Bruce preferred to slip in unobserved.

Step confidently into the old building, pass through two fire doors, unlock the little practice room, and put his bag on top of the piano. Open the window to its fullest extent, this being the beginning of May. This was only two inches, as there was some sort of catch on it, for security purposes. There must be a way of overriding that, Bruce reckoned, but he had never found it. No matter. For one thing, he did not want the caretaker shouting at him if he left the window wide open by mistake. Better to be safe than sorry.

He always felt secure when he was in the little practice room. Apart from the occasional quick visit from Jane, the Head of Music, or Sue, the second in the department, no other adult troubled him in there. It was just a matter of giving the pupils their lessons, and then locking up and leaving for the station again. It was a good arrangement.

0803. Seven minutes to practise, before Simon would arrive at 0810, since it was Thursday. Then Araminta at 0840, then those two scamps Beccy and Simna who learned together at 0910, when first lesson was beginning, and then three more individual pupils afterwards. The older pupils had their lesson before the school day started. The arrangement worked well; the building was quiet, and they did not have to miss class time.

Simon was punctual. He had been learning for eight months. He had made a good start. His note reading was poor, like most of them, but he was able to grasp the music quickly, and make it his own. He showed real promise.

Then it was time for Araminta. He always looked forward to her lesson; he had managed to work out why. It was because she talked to him. The hardest pupils were the ones who did not say a word from start to finish; he found having to make all the running in the lesson a strain. However, he was getting better at it; he did not find silent pupils so threatening as he had at first. Everything becomes easier with practice, he thought.

“Good morning, Mr. Winter, and how are you today?”

Araminta had burst in. Whatever you do, make a good entry; he had learned about that in drama lessons at school. She was bright and cheerful, as usual. Her high cheek bones tended to make her stand out from the crowd.

“Good morning, Araminta. I'm fine thanks. How are things with you?”

“Couldn’t be better, thanks,” she chirped, as she settled onto the piano stool. “I saw you in the train.”

He had wondered how long it would take for that topic to come up.

“You have got your sky-diving down to a fine art. Isn’t it rather dangerous coming so low?”

“Not at all, Mr. Winter.” He liked the way she used his name. “There are safety devices built into the suit. You couldn’t crash if you wanted to. The sensors slow you down before you hit anything. That’s also true for power cables; the suit detects the presence of the magnetic field, and prevents you from flying into them. It’s disconcerting at first, but you soon get used to the suit overriding your intentions. In fact, it can be rather fun. You should try it.”

That too had been inevitable. “An old foggy like me?”

“Nonsense. It only takes a few hours to master the basics, and after a week or two, you’ll be getting along fine. Think of it as the aerial equivalent of snowboarding.”

Bruce grimaced. He had tried skiing in the Alps on several holidays for young people; that had been bad enough. His knees had got so tired! He needed to stop every few hundred yards to cope with the ache, and there was a limit to how long you could pretend to be admiring the view. He had never ventured on to snowboarding. It looked very difficult. After a few years he had stopped going. For one thing, everyone said that if you went with Snowbiz three times, you were guaranteed to end up with a life partner; if not, you got your money back. The guarantee had failed in his case.

“I think I will stay on *terra firma*,” he said, hearing how feeble that sounded as he spoke the words. “But if I change my mind, I will come to you for advice. Now, what are you going to play me today?”

Araminta got out her book of Grade Seven pieces. She played well, he had to acknowledge. With her gifts and talents and bright personality, she would soon be making some young man very happy. They worked at some points of technique until the bell went.

The two twelve year olds Simna and Beccy were such a challenge, because they chattered so much! They were already in full flow as they stormed the door – that was how their entry felt to Bruce. Part of him was pleased, because it meant that they felt at home and comfortable in the lesson. They threw down their bags and settled happily on their stools. They had a keyboard each, one on each side of him.

Every time Beccy came for a lesson, Bruce found himself thinking of the same verse from the Song of Solomon; ‘I am dark but lovely, daughters of Jerusalem.’ This was rather nonsensical, because Simna, being coffee coloured, was actually the darker of the two, but in her case it was her natural colour. In Beccy’s case, it was caused either by exotic holidays, or by a sun tan machine. If it was the latter, he hoped she had taken good advice regarding health. Same with the former, come to think of it. Simna seemed to have been born with a permanent impish grin. He was glad he was not a classroom teacher, as he would need to get cross from time to time, and it would have been impossible with Simna, he felt.

It was such hard work keeping them focussed on playing! One week, their concentration had been so poor that they had only worked through four bars of music, and even those were not thoroughly grasped. However, they both had some talent, and they did practise, unlike some of his other pupils, so he did not feel uncomfortable with their progress. Also, they did not hold the record; with one of his adult pupils at home, the whole half hour had been spent on one bar of music! Still, it was the hardest bar in the book, as Bruce had pointed out. Also it was good to remember the story about Sir Edward Elgar, the composer. On one occasion, friends were staying with the Elgars, and after breakfast, the rest of the family took them out on a long walk, leaving Sir Edward in peace to compose. When they returned four hours later, Sir Edward had composed... just one bar! If it was in common time, with four beats to the bar, then the average rate of progress for that composition was one beat per hour. Mind you, Bruce reflected, I bet it was a good bar. There was nothing shoddy about Elgar’s music.

His morning’s lessons were soon over; six today, which meant that, allowing for the fifteen minute break at 1010, he was leaving the building at 1127. It was touch and go whether he would catch the 1133 home, but it was often late, so he might manage it if he strode along briskly.

He climbed the steps to the platform, and glanced at the monitor. What nonsense was this – thirteen minutes late? How ridiculous. He hated waiting for trains. He settled on an uncomfortable bench. There were no young people flying; they were all in class. It was a shame that people of his age had not gone in for it. The few sky-cars were high enough not to intrude. Indeed, they could hardly be seen from the ground. They were still very expensive at present, but they would become cheaper, leading to clogged skies; hence the government payout for travelling on public transport. Sometimes governments took wise decisions! Bruce settled down to wait.