

# The Fiddler's Apprentice

a short story by Patrick O'Sullivan

It was never going to be a great band. Sylvie's band almost wasn't a band at all, so disparate were the musical tastes of its members. No matter what kind of music was being played there was always someone who didn't like it. From the bass guitar, elaborate meditations in the style of Steely Dan. From the aging lead guitar, teenage anguish. And Sylvie herself, singing from the keyboard, was a folk-rock enthusiast with an over-heavy left hand.

Peter Gaffney smiled as he listened to that hand: he could imagine where she had been taught. But Gaffney was grateful to Sylvie for the invitation to join the rehearsal: it was a chance to play, to stretch.

'And your fiddle might give us ... romance,' Sylvie had said.

The band was embroiled in one of Sylvie's instrumentals: deep within it Gaffney recognised an old Irish reel called 'The Peeler's Coat'.

Gaffney tucked his fiddle under his chin, and played to the microphone. The fiddle was French, a 1935 Jules Dubois: two years ago it had cost him far more than he could afford. It hadn't yet been played enough, but already Gaffney knew that he wanted a more mellow sound.

For a while, with a smile and a nod, he coasted along with Sylvie's thumping keyboard. Inevitably, his fiddle found itself quarrelling with the lead guitar for the melody line. Then Gaffney found a line just below the lead. No longer competing, they created a middle section, swapping little phrases, before, together, they rediscovered the melody and swept it to a triumphant conclusion.

The band glowed. The lead guitar threw back his long hair. 'Magic,' he said.

There was a patter of applause from the doorway. The band rehearsed in the back room of a pub, down by the river, under the High Level Bridge. Gaffney turned to see that the pub's regulars had come, drinks in hand, to listen to the music. The landlord appeared with a tray: drinks for the band.

Sylvie sat next to Gaffney.

'Where did you learn to play the fiddle, Gaffney?' she asked.

'I taught myself.'

'You're very good.'

'I'm going to get better.'

'You play a bit like my dad. He plays the fiddle, Irish-style, like you, though he's Geordie born and bred.'

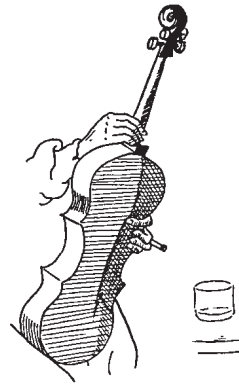
'How did he learn?'

'I don't rightly know' said Sylvie. 'Someone taught him, long ago.'

'I'd like to meet him.'

'No, you wouldn't,' said Sylvie, with deep conviction.

'No one likes to meet my Dad.'



That weekend, as usual, Gaffney went busking in Grainger Street, near the Monument. That trickle of small coins was, then, the only money he made from his music.

Sylvie found him there.

'The landlord wants us back,' she said. 'A few drinks, a few quid.' Sylvie coaxed; 'It's a residence, Gaff,' she said. Gaffney played regularly with Sylvie's band.

One night, Sylvie said, 'I've brought some of my Dad's records, Gaffney, for you to look at.' She took two LPs from a plastic bag.

'Sylvie!' Gaffney exclaimed. 'Is your father Stanley Patch?'

Gaffney knew the name, of course: the Tyneside Irish fiddler by whom others were judged. But he had never heard Patch play, and he had not known these records existed.

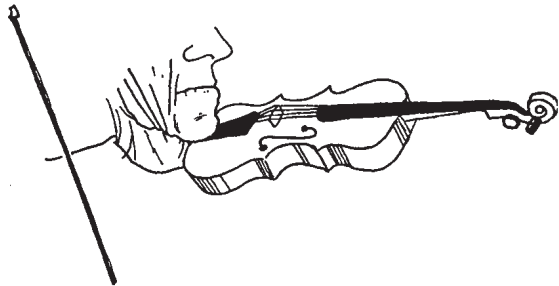
'I'd really like to hear those records, Sylvie,' he said.

'And tape them, if possible.'

'I couldn't let you take them away, Gaff,' she said. 'If anything happened to them ... It's more than my life's worth. But ...', she added, 'if I took them to your place, and you taped them there and then ...'

The record played, the tape turned. Gaffney closed his eyes and listened to the fiddle of Stanley Patch. There was so much there that he wanted, and wanted to understand. Those grace notes: how were they found? That quick, light tune, played with no feeling of effort: how was it fingered? Gaffney shook his eyes open, took his fiddle out of its case, and silently pressed his fingers against the strings. Sylvie made tea, and cuddled up against him on the sofa.

'I must meet your father,' said Gaffney.



Gaffney took his fiddle with him to the Patch household: a badge of office. Mrs Patch had set up a formal tea in the front parlour. Sylvie, strangely, was wearing a pretty, flowery dress. Sylvie was the youngest Patch. There seemed to be many brothers. An older sister, who lived across the road, popped in with her husband, Bob.

'So, Peter,' said Bob.

'Everyone calls him Gaffney,' said Sylvie.

Conversation was stilted, and had nothing to do with music. The door banged open. Every member of the Family Patch stiffened. Stanley Patch rumbled in. He was a tall, gaunt man, with sparse gingery hair. He looked round the room. His gaze passed over Gaffney, and settled on Bob.

'Ah!' he sneered. 'The son-in-law! It must be all of two days since we saw you last!'

'Ah, father-in-law,' said Bob, calmly. 'I'm glad to see that you have mellowed, with the passing of time.'

Stanley Patch crashed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The Patch lads shuffled on their chairs, looked at the floor. Sylvie was red-eyed with embarrassment.

Gaffney said, 'I was hoping to speak to Mr Patch. Mr Stanley Patch.' Bob sat back. He looked at Sylvie, at Gaffney, at the violin case.

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Bob arranged Gaffney's second visit to the Patch household. He took Gaffney to the front door. Mrs Patch pushed Gaffney into the parlour.

'Peter Gaffney to see you, Stan,' said Mrs Patch. And she closed the door.

Stanley Patch sat in an armchair, brooding. Gaffney, his violin case in his arms, waited to be acknowledged. The silence continued. Gaffney walked forward and sat down on the sofa. He put his fiddle, in its case, at his feet. Another violin case lay on the floor, beside Stanley Patch's chair.

At last, Stanley Patch spoke. 'The son-in-law ...', that sneer again, 'tells me, Gaffney, that you play a musical instrument.' Patch spoke the name, Gaffney, as if it were a surname, pure and simple.

'Yes, Mr Patch. I play the fiddle, like yourself.' Patch looked up.

'Like me, Gaffney? Like me? There's not many play the fiddle like me. It is not modest of me to say so, I know. But there's not many can play the fiddle like me.'

His large hands gripped the front of the chair. Gaffney examined those hands: yes, quite a spread there. That was part of the technique. Gaffney flexed his own workworn hands, hopefully.

'I'd like to learn, Mr Patch.'

Patch wanted to talk, but had to be coaxed into talking. His disappointment, his dead hopes. His children were not interested in the music.

'I haven't heard any of the others, Mr Patch,' said Gaffney. 'But Sylvie is quite good.'

'The nuns taught her the piano,' growled Patch. Gaffney smiled. 'You can hear the nuns, in that left hand.'

'But all she wants is ...' Patch spat out a foreign word 'the rock-and-roll!'

Gaffney let the bitterness flow past him.

'I've heard the two records, Mr Patch. They're very interesting. Now, the fingering on that fast piece ...' Patch interrupted. 'The records! The records are nothing! They came with their smiles. I gave them so much. What do they put on the record? A few tinkly tunes.' The day grew dark. The two violins stayed in their cases.

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Gaffney talked it over with Bob. 'Bob, I want him to play. If he plays I can learn from him. Do you understand?'

'I can't say I do, Gaffney lad,' said Bob. 'He's a sour old sod, at the best of times. No one gets much out of him.' He thought a while. 'You could take him a present.'

'A present? What kind of present?'

'He likes his whiskey. He becomes a bit more human, with a drop in him.'

Busking went well that week. Gaffney bought a bottle of whiskey. Without anyone having negotiated it, Sunday teatime had become the time when Gaffney visited Patch.

'I've brought you a present, Mr Patch.' Gaffney put the bottle on the low table. Patch looked at the bottle. He said nothing. Then he hauled himself upright, embraced the bottle in one large hand, and walked out. Gaffney heard him go up the stairs.

Gaffney sat by himself in the parlour, for a very long time. He knew he had mismanaged things, but he didn't quite understand how. Upstairs he could hear bumps and recrimination. At last, Mrs Patch threw open the parlour door.

'I think it's time for you to go, Peter,' she said. Gaffney found Bob.

'Oh God, Gaffney!' Bob exploded. 'Don't you know *anything* about people?'

'What should I have done?'

'You take out the bottle. *You* open it. You say, would you like a little drink, Stan? He has a glass. You have a glass. He gets a bit mellow. Out come the fiddles, and away!'

'I didn't know that, Bob.' Gaffney paused. 'Mrs Patch seemed a bit upset.'

Bob reassured him. 'I'll speak to her. And him.'

Next Sunday Gaffney went to the Patch house. He marched into the parlour. Patch sat waiting for him. Gaffney put his violin case on the low table, clicked it open, took out his fiddle, put it under his chin, and played. 'The Peeler's Coat.' He finished.

Patch sneered up at him, 'Not very good, are you, Gaffney?'

'Show me how to get better, Mr Patch.'

'All that foot-tapping nonsense. A fiddle player should stand still, like a soldier.'

'What about the fingering, Mr Patch?'

'Your fingering is crazy. And your bowing. Let me show you.' Patch took out his violin.

It was always a stormy relationship. Gaffney withstood the sneers. 'You'll never be any good, Gaffney. I don't know why I'm wasting my time.' But Patch gave his time, nonetheless. And that spring and summer Gaffney did learn from Stanley Patch.

One autumn Sunday they played on into the evening, hours of pure music that made Gaffney weak with ecstasy. Patch, too, seemed to enjoy himself: till some internal clock told him the pubs were open. Patch stopped playing.

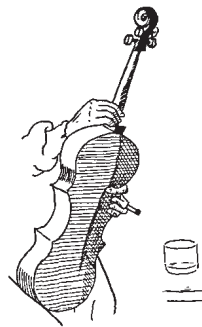
'I cannot stand your caterwauling,' he said. 'I need a pint to take away the sour taste.' Gaffney took this as polite dismissal. The violins went into their cases. But Patch spoke again.

'Do you want a drink, Gaffney?'

'That would be nice, Mr Patch,' said Gaffney, cautiously.

As Gaffney went out the door he noticed that Stanley Patch too was carrying a violin case. This was interesting. Gaffney bought the first round. For Patch a pint of beer, with whiskey chaser. Patch was known in the pub and sourly respected. A crony asked 'Will you be playing tonight, Stan?' Patch barely acknowledged him. 'I might,' he said.

This was not the formal coaxing of the folk music session. Gaffney knew by now that Stanley Patch was austere content to sit there all night, his fiddle case closed, a sneer. 'And your friend?' asked the crony, looking at Gaffney's fiddle. Gaffney thought carefully. He knew he must hand this right. 'If Mr Patch plays.'



After a few more drinks, Patch said to Gaffney, 'Did I ever show you my fiddle, Peter.' He unlocked the case. Gaffney looked at the violin, held it, balanced it. The fiddles played by Patch's generation were German-made, in the small factories of the nineteenth century. 'Carl Sheuster. 1870,' said Patch. 'Nowadays, of course, you can get all sorts of things. Electric. Plastic.'

Suddenly Patch heaved himself upright. He stood stock still, like a soldier. He looked down at Gaffney. Gaffney held the fiddle in two hands and offered it up to the master. Patch tucked the fiddle under his chin. How much beer had he drunk, how much whiskey? There was a faint red flush to his gaunt cheeks.

He roared into 'The Peeler's Coat.' Patch played, not with the arrogant ease of the Sunday lessons, but with a passion Gaffney had not heard before. After a while, Patch nodded to Gaffney. Gaffney took out his own violin and stood beside Patch. They played together. More beer, more whiskey: Patch played on. It was, more than anything, a triumph of artistry over alcohol, but the whiskey and the respectful pub were somehow part of the art. Gaffney's head swam: he stopped drinking beer and began to drink frothy pints of shandy. Even then he could hear himself, clumsy beside the intoxicated Stanley Patch.

As winter returned Gaffney went to the Patch household less often. In truth, he was fed up with insults. And Sylvie's band had folded, in a mess of under-rehearsed music and over-rehearsed bad temper.

Sylvie was very tense when she met Gaffney. One cold Saturday, Bob, 'the son-in-law', found Gaffney near the Monument.

'Old Patch has had a stroke,' he said.  
'Can I see him?'  
'I think he'd like that,' said Bob, and added, 'It's bad, Gaff.'

Gaffney called round to the house. Patch was in his bed upstairs, lying on his back, looking at the ceiling. The stroke had paralysed his left arm and the left side of his face. He could not speak. Gaffney stood at the foot of the bed. Old Patch's eyes found Gaffney. He mumbled something.

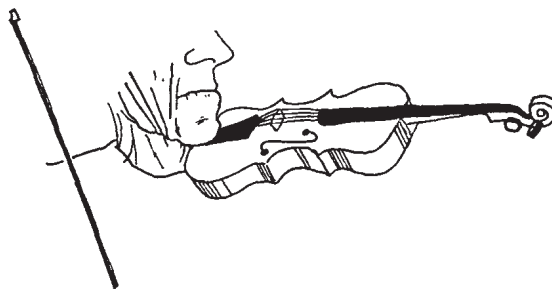
'He wants a cup of tea,' said Mrs Patch. Patch rolled his eyes in exasperation. He looked at Gaffney again, made a noise, and a stiff movement of his right arm. It was a mime: he was playing the violin. Patch then made a fist, with thumb erect. Thumbs Up. That was the only praise that Peter Gaffney ever received from Stanley Patch.

The second stroke followed quickly, and the winter funeral. Bob, the son-in-law, came to Gaffney at the back of the church. 'You're in the will, Gaffney,' he said. 'He left you his violin.' Gaffney said nothing. His anger with Stanley Patch almost spilt into words. So much knowledge and music had died with that ungenerous man. Every morsel had to be teased out of him. The tradition had almost died. 'Nobody in the family wants it,' said Bob.

Gaffney inherited the 1870 Carl Sheuster. It was a good fiddle, but not a great fiddle. Gaffney was later able to part exchange it for an 1893 Carlo Storioni, with which he is well pleased. After the funeral, Gaffney was taken back to the front parlour, and given a cup of tea. He and Sylvie cautiously remembered the band.

'It's pity we couldn't all have worked together better,' said Gaffney. 'We did some nice things.'  
'Ah well, Peter,' said Sylvie. 'We learn. I learnt a great deal from you.'

*Patrick O'Sullivan's short stories have appeared in a number of places, including BBC Radio 4's Morning Story. He is the editor of The Irish World Wide*



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