# [A Present From Brunswick](#A_Present_from_Brunswick)

# John Wyndham

THE PARTLAND HOME is the big house on the left, about a hundred yards, maybe, beyond that sign that says:

Welcome to

PLEASANTGROVE

Pop.: 3,226

and the board beneath it which adds:

The Livest Little City

In This or Any State

WATCH IT GROW

In the big Partland living-room Mrs Claybert was explaining:

‘My dears, I must apologize. Only this morning I said to myself: “Ethel, this time you’re going to be on schedule.” That’s just what I said. And now I’ve kept all you girls waiting again. Am I mortified! Something always happens. I’m interruption-prone, I guess. It was the mailman came, right as I was starting. He had a package from my boy, Jem. You know my Jem’s over in Europe, occupying those Nazis. Of course I couldn’t leave it that way. I just had to take a peek. And I was so thrilled when I saw what it was, I just had to bring it right along with me. There, now, look, isn’t that a cute present?’

Mrs Claybert, with a conjuror’s air, stripped the paper from the object she carried, and held it up. The ladies of the Pleasantgrove Cultural Club Musical Society, Recorder Section, gathered round, impressed. Among the modest instruments they were holding—and which they would have been playing by this time had Mrs Claybert kept her schedule—it was a king. The whole length of its dark body was carved with an intricacy of vines and leaves in low relief. The sharpness of the pattern was softened as though by much handling. The polished wood, of darkest chestnut shade, gleamed like satin.

‘Why, Ethel, that’s real antique. Maybe a hundred years old—maybe even more,’ said Mrs Muller. ‘Aren’t you the lucky girl! I didn’t know you’d a millionaire son. Must’ve set him back plenty.’

‘Oh, my Jem’s a good boy. He’d never be a tight-wad where his Mom was concerned,’ said Mrs Claybert, a trifle smugly.

Mrs Partland was somehow in the middle of the group when she was thought to be on the outside. It was a way Mrs Partland had. She took the instrument from Mrs Claybert’s hands, and examined it.

‘The workmanship’s just elegant,’ she pronounced, though with an air of impugning any other quality it might possess. She slid her fingers over the smooth polished undulations. ‘Yes, it certainly was made by one of those old-time craftsmen. But,’ she added severely, ‘is the pitch right?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ admitted Mrs Claybert. ‘I didn’t have time to try it. I simply said to myself: “Ethel, the girls’ll just love to see that,” and I brought it right along with me.’

Mrs Partland handed it back.

‘We’d better find out before we begin. Barbara, will you give Mrs Claybert the “D”?’ she directed.

Mrs Cooper lifted her recorder, and obliged. It was a plaintive note.

Mrs Claybert found the finger-holes, and raised the ivory mouthpiece of her resplendent instrument to her lips. She blew gently.

A silence fell on the room, and hung there a moment.

‘Well, I guess it is “D”,’ acknowledged Mrs Muller. ‘But it’s a very unusual tone, isn’t it? It is more like—well, I don’t know quite what it is like. But it certainly is a very remarkable tone indeed.’

Mrs Partland, satisfied on the technical side, moved over to the footstool which served her as a rostrum. Mrs Claybert was still looking at her instrument with astonishment and admiration.

‘You wouldn’t expect it to sound like a modern one,’ she said. ‘I mean, we have machinery and things now. That must make a difference. I guess this is the way they all sounded in those olden times.’

Mrs Partland rapped with her baton.

‘Girls!’ she said, decisively, but for the moment she went unheard.

‘You know,’ Mrs Claybert was saying, in a visionary fashion, ‘you know, somehow I can just see one of those old strolling players using maybe this very instrument in one of those big mediæval halls. There’d be great oak beams, and rushes on the floor, and——’

‘Ladies!’ commanded Mrs Partland. Her arresting tone cut short Mrs Claybert, and brought them all round facing her. She went on: ‘There’s that little thing by Purcell that we played last time. If we start with that, it’ll get our fingers limbered up nicely. Have you all got your sheets?’

The ladies disposed themselves, arranged their fingers on their recorders, and frowned at their parts. Mrs Partland stood on her footstool, baton poised.

‘Now, is everybody ready? Well, I’m afraid you’ll just have to look over Mrs Schultz’s sheet, Mrs Lubbock. Now. One—two—three. …’

From the first breath it was clear that something was not well. One by one the others faltered and stopped, leaving Mrs Claybert with a long, sweet note proceeding from her instrument, and an astonished look about her eyes. Mrs Partland drew an admonitory breath, but before she could speak Mrs Claybert’s white fingers began to skip delicately on the dark wood. A tune, light, lilting, and lovely as a May morning danced through the room. Mrs Claybert’s comfortable body began to sway lissomely as she played. She posed one foot forward. The air was enchanting, irresistible. She began to dance. Lightly as a ballerina she crossed the room, and whisked beyond the door. After her swept and swayed the ladies of the Pleasantgrove Cultural Club, like nymphs upon a sward. …

At the crossroads, the lights were against them. They stopped, and stood there, looking dazed. The cop was a man of notable self-control. All the same, his eyes were still bulging slightly as he came across. He approached Mrs Claybert with a look somewhere between compassion and suspicion. The glance he gave her instrument was wholly suspicious, as if it might be some ornamental kind of nightstick.

‘What would it be, lady? What goes on here?’ he inquired.

Mrs Claybert did not answer. Her eyes dwelt on him with the wondering look of one only half untranced. For a moment nobody else spoke, either. Mrs Partland felt that it in some way devolved on her to clear things up.

‘It’s all right, officer. We were just—well. Well, it was just a—a kind of—of—er—Corybantic fancy,’ she finished desperately.

The cop looked them over. His eyelids lowered in a slow blink, lifted again.

‘I wouldn’t know much about that,’ he admitted. ‘But, lady, if I was you, I’d go fancy it someplace else.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Partland, with unusual meekness. ‘Girls——’ she began. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw Mrs Claybert’s hands raising her instrument once more. She made a quick snatch.

‘Oh, no, you don’t,’ she said. ‘Not again!’

Mr Claybert examined the recorder. He peered at it this way and that under the light. He might have attempted to blow it had the mouthpiece not been removed to rest safely in Mrs Claybert’s handbag.

‘Yes,’ he said, judiciously. ‘It certainly is old. But is it old enough——’

‘How old would it have to be?’ Mrs Claybert asked.

‘I can’t say for sure—’bout seven or eight hundred years I guess.’

‘Well—maybe it is that.’

‘Uh-huh. Maybe. I wouldn’t know what seven hundred years looks like, anyway.’

‘If it is——’ Mrs Claybert began. But she cut off the remark, and lapsed into thought.

‘You can find out,’ observed her husband, pointedly.

She made no response. Mrs. Claybert laid the recorder down carefully on the table. The silence that ensued was broken only by the rhythm of his fingernails on the arm of his chair. His wife moved irritably.

Mr Claybert obediently stopped, but though he controlled his fingers the rhythm went on in his mind. Tum! Tum! Te-tutta, te-tutta, te-Tum! He found that his foot was beginning to tap it. Turn! Turn! Te-tutta, te-tutta, te-Tum! He checked that, too, but it still went on inside him. Soon his head was nodding to it and his lips were framing the words, though silently: Rats! Rats! We gotta get ridda the rats!

‘Maybe there’d be enough rats even in Pleasantgrove for a test, Honey,’ he suggested, at length.

Mrs Claybert shuddered.

‘If you think I’m going to fool around with a lot of rats, Harold——’

‘But it’d prove it, Honey.’

‘Maybe it would. But not rats. Not me.’

Mr Claybert sighed. ‘The trouble with women is they got imagination, but they don’t apply it. I’m right out ahead of you, Honey. Look at it this way. If it works on rats, and it works on your friends, we’ve got something. Something big. Maybe we could get it really selective. Maybe we could get, say, all the smokers of Camels, or all the members of the After-Shave Club dancing in the streets. And would that be an ad! Oh, boy! And there’d be some nice political angles, too, I guess. Now, suppose you were to play it over a nation-wide hook-up——’

‘Harold! If you want any peace in this home, you’ll put that imagination of yours right back in its cage, and let me think,’ Mrs Claybert declared.

‘But Ethel, this thing can be big. We could figure out a movie angle, too. Kinda bandwaggon for——’

‘Harold! Please! And will you stop that drumming!’

Breakfast the following morning was an even quieter meal than usual. Both the Clayberts appeared introspective. By a costly effort Harold Claybert had restrained himself from making further reference to the recorder. As a result it seemed to dominate the room in some way. He found his eyes wandering toward it continually. But only as he was about to leave did his resolution break down. At the door he hesitated.

‘Honey, I’ve not even heard you play it,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t you——? Well, just a note or two maybe?’

His wife shook her head.

‘I’m sorry, Harold, but the very last thing I said to myself before I went to sleep was: “Ethel, don’t you dare blow that thing again till you get it some place where it can’t do any harm!” And I guess I’d better stick to that.’

After he had gone, Mrs Claybert did her cleaning speedily, if absentmindedly. When she had set the house to rights she picked up the recorder, and polished it gently with a duster. She contemplated it in a thoughtful fashion for a moment, then she took the ivory mouthpiece from her bag and pushed it into place. She half-lifted it to her mouth, and paused. Then she lowered it, and laid it on the table again. She went upstairs to fetch a coat. As she came down she picked up the recorder, and, with a slightly furtive air, hid it beneath the coat before she opened the front door.

Instead of getting out the car in her usual way she kept on down the path to the road. There she turned to her left, and began walking away from the town and the houses. After less than a mile a track led off to the right across a field. She followed it over that field and the next, and into the woods beyond. It was quiet there, and peaceful. Among the trees she felt removed from the world, as well as hidden, and her own inner self stretched the creases out of its wings a little. A faint footpath slanted away from the track, and, following it for a short distance, she came to a small natural clearing. There, in the sun, she spread out her coat, laid the recorder carefully on it, and sat down.

In spite of the sunshine there was a tinge of gentle eighteenth-century melancholy. In her present mood Mrs Claybert found that not unpleasant.

For a while she sat, pensive; dreaming a little, with a touch of nostalgia. Not that she was unhappy. There was Jem—and Harold, too, of course, and Harold was a good husband, as husbands come. But she missed Jem. Germany seemed a terrible long way away. There’s a kind of wistful mood that can come on you when you stop to think that the only child God let you bear has somehow turned into a man who’s halfway round the world—and you’re over forty now. … You can’t help wondering about it sometimes. Not kicking: just wondering what it might all have been like if, maybe, it had been some other way. …

After a bit Ethel Claybert picked up the recorder. She stroked the smooth wood with her fingertips because it was Jem who had sent it. She looked beyond it, beyond the trees, smiling a little. Then, still smiling, she put the ivory mouthpiece to her lips, and began to play. …

A meeting, on the front porch of Mayor Duncan’s house by the cross-roads, included several of Pleasantgrove’s more influential citizens. Though it was informal, it was clearly aware of obligations; it had, perhaps, authority, too; but what it excelled in was bewilderment. The only face to wear an expression of decision was Mrs Partland’s, but that was habitual, and this time nothing was coming of it. The look of reliability which Jim Duncan’s conception of office caused him to wear was a kind of drop-scene, deceiving nobody. Mrs Muller was offering comment and suggestion at her usual high velocity, but they had an expendable, radio-background quality. Everybody present stood looking out on Main Street in perplexity. Everybody, that is, except Mrs Claybert who sat in the rocker, weeping quietly.

The sight of the junction of Main Street and Lincoln Avenue at that moment was one that nobody was going to forget. Not only the crossing itself, but the entrances to the four streets were jammed with children. The girls for the most part wore flaxen plaits hanging in pairs from beneath white caps embroidered with coloured flowers. Short sleeves puffed out at their shoulders above tight bodices, and their full, striped skirts were covered in front with bright aprons. The boys were in tunics of green or brown, and long tight pants. Their hats were coloured, with the brims shaped to narrow peaks in front, and the high crowns each set with a feather. All the roadway looked as if it had been spread with a brilliant but restless carpet from which rose a hubbub of young voices mingled with the tocketty clatter of hundreds of small clogs.

Astonishment was not one-sidedly restricted to the citizens of Pleasantgrove. The children’s faces reflected it. Most of them were still looking around them in bewilderment, and regarding the amenities of the town with cautious suspicion. Others were already discovering compensations. There was a group near the movie house stricken with delighted awe by the posters. Another had its noses flattened against the plate-glass windows of Louise Pallister’s Candy Store. Over their heads Louise herself could be observed bobbing about stressfully behind her barricaded door, her hands clasped, and her mouth opening for alternate ‘Oh, dear!’—‘Oh, my!’ Across on the other corner there was a press where some juvenile instinct had already led to the discovery of a soda fountain in Tony’s Drug Store. But these high spots of adventure were only local, on the fringes of the crowd. Within, it consisted of children who stared about them in puzzlement while little girls and boys clung, big-eyed and fearful, to their elder sisters’ skirts.

Not one of the Pleasantgrove citizens showed the least joy in the situation.

‘I don’t get it,’ complained Al Deakin from the filling station. ‘Where the heck did they all come from?’ he demanded. He turned aggressively on Mrs Claybert. ‘How did they get here? Where did they come from?’ he repeated.

Mrs Claybert sniffed the unsympathetic atmosphere. Before she could answer Mrs Partland said, decisively:

‘We can leave that till later. What I want to know is now they are here, who is going to do something about it?’ She looked pointedly at Mayor Duncan. ‘Something has to be done,’ she added, emphatically.

Jim Duncan maintained the air of a man detached, and thinking deeply. He was still keeping it up when Elmer Drew shuffled forward and plucked urgently at his sleeve. Elmer was a house-painter who doubled in the less spacious art of sign-writing, but both are professions which make a conscientious man finicky about details.

‘How many do you reckon there’d be, Jim?’ he asked.

Here was something a Mayor could try to answer. Jim relaxed slightly.

‘H’m,’ he judged. ‘I’d say three thousand, Elmer. Not less. Maybe more.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Elmer nodded, and edged his way out of the group to get his brushes. The way he saw it, it’d be near enough to change the preliminary 3 of the population figure to a 6, just till someone made up the full count.

‘Three thousand kids!’ repeated Al Deakin. ‘Three thousand! Well, that fixes it, I guess. No community the size of ours can stand that.’

‘And how does that fix it?’ asked Mrs Partland, coolly.

‘Why, makes it a State job. It’s too big for us to handle.’

‘No!’ said Mrs Claybert, distinctly.

They looked at her.

‘What do you mean, “no”?’ Al demanded. ‘What else? What can we do with three thousand kids? Come to that, why should we? Seems to me you’ve got a mighty lot of explaining to do, Ethel Claybert.’

Mrs Claybert cast a forlorn glance round the semi-circle that enclosed her.

‘Well, it’s difficult to explain …’ she said.

Mrs Muller came generously to her rescue.

‘I guess three thousand children are sometimes not much more difficult to explain than one,’ she said, sharply.

This reference to an obscure incident in Al Deakin’s past had the effect of deflating him for the moment.

‘Well, we can’t just go on standing here and doing nothing,’ Mrs Partland said. ‘Those children are going to have to be fed soon, and—er—looked after.’

It was quite true. Wonder was giving way to fractiousness. Some of the larger girls had taken little ones up in their arms and were lulling them to and fro, golden plaits swinging. Mrs Claybert ran down the steps and came back holding one pretty small thing close to her.

‘That’s right. We have to do something,’ agreed Mrs Muller.

‘There’s that old army camp out by Rails Hill,’ said Mrs Partland. ‘If we could feed them and take them out there——’

‘And who’s going to feed them?’ demanded Al Deakin. ‘I hold that Ethel Claybert just ain’t got the right to dump three thousand kids down here and expect…’

‘I reckon Pleasantgrove folks will be able to find a meal or two for them,’ the Mayor put in. ‘But outside that—— Oh, there’s Larry!’ he broke off. Like a ship-wrecked mariner hailing a lifeboat he called across the street: ‘Hey, Larry.’

The cop looked up, and waved his big hand. He started to come over, wading carefully through children, and looking not unlike a man picking his way across a flowerbed.

‘Who did it, anyway? Who brought ’em here?’ he demanded, as he climbed the steps.

Everybody looked at Mrs Claybert. So did the cop.

‘Are you responsible—for all this lot?’ he inquired.

‘Well, yes—I suppose I am …’ admitted Mrs Claybert.

‘Three doggone thousand of ’em,’ put in Al Deakin. ‘Fifteen hundred little Gretchens, and fifteen hundred little Hanses—and not one word of American between the lot.’

The cop tilted his cap back, and scratched.

‘From Europe?’ he asked.

‘Well, yes …’ said Mrs Claybert again.

‘You got their immigration papers?’ inquired the cop.

‘Well, no …’ Mrs Claybert told him.

The cop turned and surveyed the vista of children. He turned back.

‘Lady,’ he said, ‘some place there’s several freight-cars of trouble marked “Rush”, and they’re all headed your way.’ He paused. ‘What are they? D.P. children?’ he added.

Mrs Claybert detached her gaze from his, and looked out over the street.

‘Why—why, yes,’ she said. ‘Yes—I guess that’s just what they are.’

‘They don’t look a bit like the D.P. children in Life,’ said Mrs Partland. ‘Too clean. And tidy. Besides, they all looked happy before they began to get hungry.’

‘Wouldn’t you be happy, coming to a town like Pleasant-grove after all those ruins over in Europe?’ Mrs Muller asked.

‘They’ve got a right to look happy,’ said Mrs Claybert, with a sudden firmness. ‘And Pleasantgrove has a duty to see that they are happy.’

‘Hey——!’ began Al Deakin.

Mrs Claybert clutched the little doll of a girl that she was holding more firmly to her breast.

‘Aren’t they lovely children? Did you ever see lovelier children?’ she demanded.

‘Sure they are, but——’

‘And is there anything more valuable to a community than its children—and its children’s happiness?’ she went on, fiercely.

‘Well, no, but——’

‘Then I guess that makes Pleasantgrove the richest community in this state,’ concluded Mrs Claybert, triumphantly.

There was a difficult silence.

‘Er—sure. That’s mighty true,’ agreed Mayor Duncan. ‘But right now we got to be practical.’ He turned an appealing eye on the cop.

The fascination of novelty was fast wearing thinner with the children. More of the little ones had begun to cry, few of the older ones still smiled. A girl in a brightly striped skirt with an embroidered blouse frothing out of her laced velvet bodice climbed up on to a box near the front of the dry-goods store. Her mouth opened, and she began to sway with her arms. At first nothing was audible from the porch. Then voices round her took up the song. It spread outwards across the crowd until it drowned the crying. The children began to sway together as they sang, rippling like a field of barley in the wind. Mrs Claybert swung the one she held in time with the rest. She listened to the unfamiliar words with a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes.

‘What we gotta do,’ said the cop, cutting through the lilt of massed trebles, ‘what we gotta do is to get on to the State Orphanage and tell ’em to start in sending trucks right away. Then we got to see about feedin’ the kids till the trucks pull in.’

Mrs Claybert stiffened.

‘Orphanage!’ she exclaimed, in a thrusting voice.

She put down the little girl, and advanced.

‘We gotta be practical——’ began the cop, but she stopped him with a gesture.

‘For the first time in my life I’m ashamed to be a citizen of Pleasantgrove,’ she proclaimed, bitterly. ‘You could send all these lovely children off to be orphans?’

‘But, Mrs Claybert, they are orphans——’

Mrs Claybert swept that aside.

‘They come away from that dreadful Europe; they come here to the land of liberty and opportunity; they ask you for love—and you give them orphanages. Just what do you think they’re going to say about the American way of life when they grow up?’

Mayor Duncan looked at her helplessly.

‘But, Mrs Claybert, you got to be reasonable——’

‘Is this, or is this not, a Christian community?’ demanded Mrs Claybert. I’ve lived in Pleasantgrove all my life. I thought Pleasantgrove folks were great-hearted folks. Now the test comes I find they haven’t got hearts or Christian charity.’

‘Listen, lady,’ said the cop, in a placatory tone. ‘We got hearts and we got Christian charity—but the little thing we can’t fix is Christian miracles.’

Mrs Claybert glared at him, and then at the rest. Without comment she picked up the recorder from the floor beside the rocker. Looking out across the singing children, she settled her fingers on the holes.

‘You just don’t deserve to have lovely children,’ she said.

She lifted the pipe. Then she paused.

‘I guess——’ she said, wistfully—‘I guess the only thing that’s wrong with children is that they grow up to be people like you.’

And she put the pipe to her lips.

As the long mellow note floated out across Main Street the children began to turn and look at Mayor Duncan’s porch. The singing faded away. The little ones ceased to cry, and smiled as their sisters put them on their feet. There was no sound but the single note, trembling a little … Mrs Claybert put one foot forward. Her fingers flittered up and down the pipe stem. The air came, light and gay, tripping brightly as sunbeams on broken water. Hundreds of small clogs began to patter with a click-clocketty noise to its rhythm.

Down the steps danced Mrs Claybert, and off across Main Street, through a lane that opened among the children. They closed in behind her as she went, golden plaits and bright skirts swirling, red stockings flashing, feet tat-tattering.

There was a scuffle inside the Mayor’s house and his two children bounded out across the porch to join the dancing crowd beyond.

‘Hey! Stop them!’ Jim Duncan called, but somehow neither he nor anyone else could move to do it.

Mrs Claybert turned down Lincoln Avenue with the children streaming like a bouncing, bubbling, coloured flood behind her. Down the front yards the American children came tumbling to join the rest. Out of the school poured another stream skipping and dancing to flow into the passing crowd and whirl away with them up the street.

‘Hey! Mrs Claybert! Come back!’ bawled Mayor Duncan, but his hail was lost in the children’s voices.

The only sound that could top the laughing and the singing and the clatter of clogs was the tune of Mrs Claybert’s pipe as she danced along ahead, across the fields, and away to the woods beyond. …

By the time that conscientious citizen Elmer Drew had finished turning the 3 into a 6, hotter news had reached him. So when the first carloads of reporters, detectives, and F.B.I. passed him as they came tearing into Pleasantgrove he was already painting out the population figure altogether, pending a revised estimate. After he had done that, he considered the lower board for a moment. Then he came to a decision, unscrewed it, and tucked it under his arm.

On his way back into town he met Mrs Partland. Her children were walking sedately, one on either side of her. Elmer stopped and stared. Mrs Partland beamed.

‘The American children chose to come back to their own folks,’ she told him proudly.

‘Yes,’ agreed Mortimer Partland, Junior, with a nod. ‘They didn’t have any ice cream, or movies, or gum—nothing but dancing! Was it corny!’

‘And Mrs Claybert?’ asked Elmer.

‘Oh, well, I guess she just likes dancing,’ said the young Mortimer Partland.

Elmer turned and walked back up the road. On the board he rewrote ‘Pop.: 3,226’, and then thoughtfully changed the last figure to a 5. Underneath, with a deep feeling of civic satisfaction, he refixed the board which said:

WATCH IT GROW