



The Little Violinist, by Thomas Bailey Aldrich

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Title: The Little Violinist

Author: Thomas Bailey Aldrich

Release Date: November 6, 2007 [EBook #23355]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

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Produced by David Widger

THE LITTLE VIOLINIST.

By Thomas Bailey Aldrich

Boston And New York Houghton Mifflin Company

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Weep with me, all you that read This little story; And know, for whom a tear you shed, Death's self is sorry.

Ben Jonson.

This story is no invention of mine. I could not invent anything half so lovely and pathetic as seems to me the incident which has come ready-made to my hand.

Some of you, doubtless, have heard of James Speaight, the infant violinist, or Young Americus, as he was called. He was born in London, I believe, and was only four years old when his father brought him to this country, less than three years ago. Since that time he has appeared in concerts and various entertainments in many of our principal cities, attracting unusual attention by his musical skill. I confess, however, that I had not heard of him until last month, though it seems he had previously given two or three public performances in the city where I live. I had not heard of him, I say, until last month; but since then I do not think a day has passed when this child's face has not risen up in my memory--the little half-sad face, as I saw it once, with its large, serious eyes and infantile mouth.

I have, I trust, great tenderness for all children; but I know that I have a special place in my heart for those poor little creatures who figure in circuses and shows, or elsewhere, as "infant prodigies." Heaven help such little folk! It was an unkind fate that did not make them commonplace, stupid, happy girls and boys like our own Fannys and Charleys and Harrys. Poor little waifs, that never know any babyhood or childhood--sad human midges, that flutter for a moment in the glare of the gaslights, and are gone. Pitiful little children, whose tender limbs and minds are so torn and strained by thoughtless task-masters, that it seems scarcely a regrettable thing when the circus caravan halts awhile on its route to make a small grave by the wayside.

I never witness a performance of child-acrobats, or the exhibition of any forced talent, physical or mental, on the part of children, without protesting, at least in my own mind, against the blindness and cruelty of their parents or guardians, or whoever has care of them.

I saw at the theatre, the other night, two tiny girls--mere babies they were--doing such feats upon a bar of wood suspended from the ceiling as made my blood run cold. They were twin sisters, these mites, with that old young look on their faces which all such unfortunates have. I hardly dared glance at them, up there in the air, hanging by their feet from the swinging bar, twisting their fragile spines and distorting their poor little bodies, when they ought to have been nestled in soft blankets in a cosy chamber, with the angels that guard the sleep of little children hovering above them. I hope that the father of those two babies will read and ponder this page, on which I record not alone my individual protest, but the protest of hundreds of men and women who took no pleasure in that performance, but witnessed it with a pang of pity.

There is a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dumb Animals. There ought to be a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Little Children; and a certain influential gentleman, who does some things well and other things very badly, ought to attend to it. The name of this gentleman is Public Opinion. { 1 }

1 This sketch was written in 1874. The author claims for it no other merit than that of having been among the earliest appeals for the formation of such a Society as now exists-- the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

But to my story.

One September morning, about five years and a half ago, there wandered to my fireside, hand in hand, two small personages who requested in a foreign language, which I understood at once, to be taken in and fed and clothed and sent to school and loved and tenderly cared for. Very modest of them--was it not?--in view of the

fact that I had never seen either of them before. To all intents and purposes they were perfect strangers to *me*. What was my surprise when it turned out (just as if it were in a fairy legend) that these were my own sons! When I say they came hand in hand, it is to advise you that these two boys were twins, like that pair of tiny girls I just mentioned.

These young gentlemen are at present known as Charley and Talbot, in the household, and to a very limited circle of acquaintances outside; but as Charley has declared his intention to become a circus-rider, and Talbot, who has not so soaring an ambition, has resolved to be a policeman, it is likely the world will hear of them before long. In the mean time, and with a view to the severe duties of the professions selected, they are learning the alphabet, Charley vaulting over the hard letters with an agility which promises well for his career as circus-rider, and Talbot collaring the slippery S's and pursuing the suspicious X Y Z's with the promptness and boldness of a night-watchman.

Now it is my pleasure not only to feed and clothe Masters Charley and Talbot as if they were young princes or dukes, but to look to it that they do not wear out their ingenious minds by too much study. So I occasionally take them to a puppet-show or a musical entertainment, and always in holiday time to see a pantomime. This last is their especial delight. It is a fine thing to behold the business-like air with which they climb into their seats in the parquet, and the gravity with which they immediately begin to read the play-bill upside down. Then, between the acts, the solemnity with which they extract the juice from an orange, through a hole made with a lead-pencil, is also a noticeable thing.

Their knowledge of the mysteries of Fairyland is at once varied and profound. Everything delights, but nothing astonishes them. That people covered with spangles should dive headlong through the floor; that fairy queens should step out of the trunks of trees; that the poor wood-cutter's cottage should change, in the twinkling of an eye, into a glorious palace or a goblin grotto under the sea, with crimson fountains and golden staircases and silver foliage--all that is a matter of course. This is the kind of world they live in at present. If these things happened at home they would not be astonished.

The other day, it was just before Christmas, I saw the boys attentively regarding a large pumpkin which lay on the kitchen floor, waiting to be made into pies. If that pumpkin had suddenly opened, if wheels had sprouted out on each side, and if the two kittens playing with an onion-skin by the range had turned into milk-white ponies and harnessed themselves to this Cinderella coach, neither Charley nor Talbot would have considered it an unusual circumstance.

The pantomime which is usually played at the Boston Theatre during the holidays is to them positive proof that the stories of Cinderella and Jack of the Beanstalk and Jack the Giant-Killer have historical solidity. They like to be reassured on that point. So one morning last January, when I informed Charley and Talbot, at the breakfast-table, that Prince Rupert and his court had come to town,

"Some in jags, Some in rags, And some in velvet gown,"

the news was received with great satisfaction; for this meant that we were to go to the play.

For the sake of the small folk, who could not visit him at night, Prince Rupert was gracious enough to appear every Saturday afternoon during the month. We decided to wait upon his Highness at one of his *matinées*.

You would never have dreamed that the sun was shining brightly outside, if you had been with us in the theatre that afternoon. All the window-shutters were closed, and the great glass chandelier hanging from the gayly painted dome was one blaze of light.

But brighter even than the jets of gas were the ruddy, eager faces of countless boys and girls, fringing the balconies and crowded into the seats below, longing for the play to begin. And nowhere were there two

merrier or more eager faces than those of Charley and Talbot, pecking now and then at a brown paper cone filled with white grapes, which I held, and waiting for the solemn green curtain to roll up, and disclose the coral realm of the Naiad Queen.

I shall touch very lightly on the literary aspects of the play. Its plot, like that of the modern novel, was of so subtle a nature as not to be visible to the naked eye. I doubt if the dramatist himself could have explained it, even if he had been so condescending as to attempt to do so. There was a bold young prince--Prince Rupert, of course--who went into Wonderland in search of adventures. He reached Wonderland by leaping from the castle of Drachenfels into the Rhine. Then there was one Snaps, the prince's valet, who did not in the least want to go, but went, and got terribly frightened by the Green Demons of the Chrysolite Cavern, which made us all laugh--it being such a pleasant thing to see somebody else scared nearly to death. Then there were knights in brave tin armor, and armies of fair pre-Raphaelite amazons in all the colors of the rainbow, and troops of unhappy slave-girls, who did nothing but smile and wear beautiful dresses, and dance continually to the most delightful music. Now you were in an enchanted castle on the banks of the Rhine, and now you were in a cave of amethysts and diamonds at the bottom of the river--scene following scene with such bewildering rapidity that finally you did not quite know where you were.

But what interested me most, and what pleased Charley and Talbot even beyond the Naiad Queen herself, was the little violinist who came to the German Court, and played before Prince Rupert and his bride.

It was such a little fellow! He was not more than a year older than my own boys, and not much taller. He had a very sweet, sensitive face, with large gray eyes, in which there was a deep-settled expression that I do not like to see in a child. Looking at his eyes alone, you would have said he was sixteen or seventeen, and he was merely a baby!

I do not know enough of music to assert that he had wonderful genius, or any genius at all; but it seemed to me he played charmingly, and with the touch of a natural musician.

At the end of his piece, he was lifted over the foot-lights of the stage into the orchestra, where, with the conductor's *bâton* in his hand, he directed the band in playing one or two difficult compositions. In this he evinced a carefully trained ear and a perfect understanding of the music.

I wanted to hear the little violin again; but as he made his bow to the audience and ran off, it was with a half-wearied air, and I did not join with my neighbors in calling him back. "There 's another performance to-night," I reflected, "and the little fellow is n't very strong." He came out, however, and bowed, but did not play again.

All the way home from the theatre my children were full of the little violinist, and as they went along, chattering and frolicking in front of me, and getting under my feet like a couple of young spaniels (they did not look unlike two small brown spaniels, with their fur-trimmed overcoats and sealskin caps and ear-lappets), I could not help thinking how different the poor little musician's lot was from theirs.

He was only six years and a half old, and had been before the public nearly three years. What hours of toil and weariness he must have been passing through at the very time when my little ones were being rocked and petted and shielded from every ungentle wind that blows! And what an existence was his now--travelling from city to city, practising at every spare moment, and performing night after night in some close theatre or concert-room when he should be drinking in that deep, refreshing slumber which childhood needs! However much he was loved by those who had charge of him, and they must have treated him kindly, it was a hard life for the child.

He ought to have been turned out into the sunshine; that pretty violin--one can easily understand that he was fond of it himself--ought to have been taken away from him, and a kite-string placed in his hand instead. If

God had set the germ of a great musician or a great composer in that slight body, surely it would have been wise to let the precious gift ripen and flower in its own good season.

This is what I thought, walking home In the amber glow of the wintry sunset; but my boys saw only the bright side of the tapestry, and would have liked nothing better than to change places with little James Speaight. To stand in the midst of Fairyland, and play beautiful tunes on a toy fiddle, while all the people clapped their hands--what could quite equal that? Charley began to think it was no such grand thing to be a circus-rider, and the dazzling career of policeman had lost something of its glamour in the eyes of Talbot.

It is my custom every night, after the children are snug in their nests and the gas is turned down, to sit on the side of the bed and chat with them five or ten minutes. If anything has gone wrong through the day, it is never alluded to at this time. None but the most agreeable topics are discussed. I make it a point that the boys shall go to sleep with untroubled hearts. When our chat is ended, they say their prayers. Now, among the pleas which they offer up for the several members of the family, they frequently intrude the claims of rather curious objects for Divine compassion. Sometimes it is the rocking-horse that has broken a leg, sometimes it is Shem or Japhet, who has lost an arm in disembarking from Noah's ark; Pinky and Inky, the kittens, and Bob, the dog, are never forgotten.

So it did not surprise me at all this Saturday night when both boys prayed God to watch over and bless the little violinist.

The next morning at the breakfast-table, when I unfolded the newspaper, the first paragraph my eyes fell upon was this:--

"James Speaight, the infant violinist, died in this city late on Saturday night. At the *matinée* of the 'Naiad Queen' on the afternoon of that day, when little James Speaight came off the stage, after giving his usual violin performance, Mr. Shewell { 1 } noticed that he appeared fatigued, and asked if he felt ill. He replied that he had a pain in his heart, and then Mr. Shewell suggested that he remain away from the evening performance. He retired quite early, and about midnight his father heard him say, '*Gracious God, make room for another little child in Heaven.*' No sound was heard after this, and his father spoke to him soon afterwards; he received no answer, but found his child dead."

1 The stage-manager.

The printed letters grew dim and melted into each other, as I tried to re-read them.

I glanced across the table at Charley and Talbot eating their breakfast, with the slanted sunlight from the window turning their curls into real gold, and I had not the heart to tell them what had happened.

Of all the prayers that floated up to heaven, that Saturday night, from the bedsides of sorrowful men and women, or from the cots of innocent children, what accents could have fallen more piteously and tenderly upon the ear of a listening angel than the prayer of little James Speaight! He knew he was dying. The faith he had learned, perhaps while running at his mother's side, in some green English lane, came to him then. He remembered it was Christ who said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me;" and the beautiful prayer rose to his lips, "Gracious God, make room for another little child in Heaven."

I folded up the newspaper silently, and throughout the day I did not speak before the boys of the little violinist's death; but when the time came for our customary chat in the nursery, I told the story to Charley and Talbot. I do not think that they understood it very well, and still less did they understand why I lingered so much longer than usual by their bedside that Sunday night.

As I sat there in the dimly lighted room, it seemed to me that I could hear, in the pauses of the winter wind,

faintly and doubtfully somewhere in the distance, the sound of the little violin.

Ah, that little violin!--a cherished relic now. Perhaps it plays soft, plaintive airs all by itself, in the place where it is kept, missing the touch of the baby fingers which used to waken it into life!

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