Sketch

Volume 11, Number 1 1944 Article 5

The Lightness of a Violin

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Abstract

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JOHN sat straight in the hard chair and looked stubbornly ahead at the black dancing notes of music. He held the violin close, his fingers curled around its slender fingerboard, the rounded corners pressing against him, hard and unyielding, yet alive. The violin belonged there, with its unbelievable lightness. It belonged to him. And now he was eighteen; and it would be thrust from him. Eighteen. A man must lay down his heart when he takes up arms.

The audience stirred and rattled programs. Clarinets echoed each other’s weird and hollow scales. Cellists scraped at their strings. A few trial blasts came from the bass—unmusical notes. Over in the second violin section the youngsters twanged their A strings at different pitches. John fingered the black ebony pegs. Smooth now. Seven years ago they hadn’t been smooth, just new—shiny. Seven years had been just right to learn to sing with this delicate piece—mellow and clear music. But now he was leaving it. Would he ever be able to sing with it again? Perhaps after the scarred, ugly world, the discordant music, the fierce hard men—perhaps he would never want to sing with this part of him.

The clashing shrill of instruments cried out and rose to a great discord of sound. The rosin was sticky and hard on his fingers as he ran them up and down on the firm strings, making tiny staccato notes. A girl stumbled up to the chair beside him and dropped onto it. Throwing the red hair back from her face, she adjusted the pegs of her violin quickly and reached to arrange the music on the stand in front. She had more concerts—she could afford to be late. She’d be glad he was gone. Then she could sit on the outside and someone would turn music for her. John wondered if she knew how the red of her lipstick clashed with her hair, and if she did know, if she cared. She breathed heavily, exhausted from running the last block probably. She looked uncomfortable—as most of the girls did—trying to look at ease on a hard, straight chair.
When he had taken the violin from the case tonight it was the same—the silk cloth, mottled red and blue, was musty and old. The bow had slipped from its catch into his hand, the screw turning neatly with swift strokes until the beautiful long hairs were just this side of taut. The strings, strong and fine, had glided easily into harmony with a slight touch to the pegs. He had listened a bit longer to the G and D. They were so perfect together it prickled the back of his neck.

The clamor of brass and string hushed suddenly, as though a great hand had been placed over the orchestra. Mr. Lambert came from the wings, across the edge of the stage, not hearing the gush of applause from the darkened auditorium. John smiled to watch him climb onto his platform with a great attempt at dignity. His legs were so short and the step so big. It always seemed that a little push from behind would help. The sharp knocking of the baton tightened the muscles in John's arms and back. One foot slid up against the leg of the chair, the other out against the foot of the music rack. Carefully he raised the violin, fitting it into the hollow between his cheek and collar bone, grasping it firmly by raising his shoulder. For the last time, his arm curved around it, his fingers poised. His bow balanced lightly in his hand above, perfect in its last part. He looked up and saw the conductor’s outstretched arms. This was it.

The notes came swift and clean. They sang and swelled. The fingers knew they had the music in their movements and released it all. John knew that it was right—every inflection, every intonation. This violin could sing in no other way. This power would never go, though the fingers learned the dirty parts of guns, the stain of blood and grime.

And then he heard the symphony. Made by no one person, it carried the glee and happiness of the woodwinds, the passion of the strings, strength and power from the brass, support from the tympani. It was a harmony. It was one soul, one great purpose, arising from where? Where were the notes the violin was creating? Gone. Gone beyond him. They didn’t belong to him. The symphony! That was it. A dream. A dream someone had felt and left for others to redream.

The great crescendo lessened. Sweetly came the dream, and lingering. John’s eyes caressed the tender lines of the violin. Then they moved up to the baton of the conductor, following its flowing pattern. On his shoulder he felt the lightness of a rifle.