And the Poor Would Die

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Abstract

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by David Keller

DIETER RADEBAUGH. I haven't thought of him for a long time, but as I sit in my easy chair I can see him as if twenty-five years haven't elapsed.

I first met Dieter when I was eleven. As a small child I had contracted a case of rheumatic fever which had left me with a weak heart, so I was unable to join in any of my comrades' games. So when Mr. Radebaugh came to town my mother engaged him to give me piano lessons twice a week.

I liked him at first sight. He was very tall and thin, but not cadaverous, and his fingers were long, and flattened at the ends; spatulated I think it is called. But the thing that struck me the most about him were his eyes; so dark as to seem black, they contrasted with his light hair and skin to give his gaze a strange intensity. My mother said he had been a famous concert pianist until he had some sort of illness which she said I was too young to understand. He had come to our town to rest, she said.

Under Mr. Radebaugh my playing progressed rapidly. He never said much, and that always as if he were explaining some point to another pianist, never as a teacher would talk to a child. Once in awhile he would play some passage
that my clumsy fingers had twisted out of shape. When he played it, it seemed inhumanly beautiful; his hands would throw themselves at the keyboard, moving so swiftly that they seemed to be completely independent of their owner. Under these fingers runs would again become the sustained ripple that Beethoven or Brahms had intended them to be.

Within the space of a few months, Mr. Radebaugh and I had become good friends, partly because I, like him, was quiet and because both of us were often lonely. Sometimes after my lessons on Saturday afternoons he would take some books and his guitar, and after locking his studio we would walk across the meadow just outside of town and sit under a tree, away from the heat of the dusty sun. While I listened he would sing songs and play his guitar. One of the songs I especially remember; it was a very sad song and one of the verses went "If living was something that money could buy, the rich would live and the poor would die." Other times he would read me poems from his books; I could never tell exactly what they were about, but I somehow managed to grasp their meaning from the tone of his voice.

The other people in our town didn't like Mr. Radebaugh much. In a small Nebraska town like Eggleton the people have distorted ideas about the way musicians live, and they found him queer. His habit of never saying much, but always looking as if he were observing everything, made them uncomfortable, and they avoided him whenever possible. One evening after dinner I overheard my mother and father talking about the rumors they had heard about Mr. Radebaugh. Mr. Deville, the banker, had told my mother that he had heard that Mr. Radebaugh had been involved in some scandalous affair with a well-known European singer, and that he read dirty books. My mother's voice was very angry, and she said that she knew it was a lie. I didn't like Mr. Deville. He had a round, pasty face with thin greasy hair, which he parted in the middle. Everyone was afraid of him because he owned lots of the houses in town, including the one where Mr. Radebaugh had his room and studio, and people were afraid that Mr. Deville would somehow make them give up their homes.

I didn't tell Mr. Radebaugh what I had learned, but he could tell that there was gossip going around. He wasn't
happy as often as he had been, and his playing became more furious, as if he were trying to escape into another world through his playing.

As I came for a lesson about a month later, from the hallway I heard Mr. Radebaugh playing. I crept into his studio very quietly so that he wouldn't notice me and sat down in a chair in the corner. He was playing the slow movement of a Chopin Sonata, and tears were rolling down his face. As he played he would suddenly cry out, "Oh how beautiful it sounds!" When he finished the movement he held his hands in front of him, and through his tears he tenderly addressed them, "You played very well, right hand. How beautiful it sounded. And you, left hand. You have never done so well before. I don't care what they say about you, it was marvelous."

After a few seconds he seemed to shake himself into awareness, and he noticed that I was in the room. He seemed embarrassed at the tears he had shed, but he made no comment on the conversation with his hands. I was very shaken; I couldn't understand the scene I had just witnessed, and my playing was nervous. He excused me early, and I left hurriedly to try and sort out my thoughts on the walk home. I could tell that something was wrong with Mr. Radebaugh; his strange mood frightened me. I wasn't afraid of what would happen to me, but rather of what I thought might happen to him.

The rumors around town were really affecting Mr. Radebaugh, because when I came for my next lesson he stopped me after ten minutes, and suddenly began to quote me a poem. I later found it among his things and kept it. His voice was filled with agony as he said it:

"I have tasted ashes of martyrs; I have been spat out by the Pope and devoured by the state; I have ridden in the Crusades on the end of a spear; I have cried out and become silent at the will of the Inquisitors; I have drowned in the blood of my family at the Reformation and Counter-Reformation; every heresy's banner is a strip of skin off my back. I have cracked like a fireside chestnut for the ignited witches; I have lain in my bed and wept blood under the popular bells of Sunday."

And although it was only a poem, it seemed to fill him
and become a part of him. Then he suddenly shouted “They won’t leave me alone! Why, why, why?” His face was twisted with fear, and his eyes stared straight ahead, as if they couldn’t express the horror he felt. I wanted to cry, but I felt afraid to, so I ran from the room.

When I came home from school the next day, our house was in a turmoil. My mother was crying about something, and my father, with a strange look on his face, was trying to comfort her, while our dog stood in the corner howling and whining at mother’s distress. My father took me aside and explained to me that Mr. Deville and some other people had presented Mr. Radebaugh with a petition. They felt that he was a bad influence on the children and had asked him to leave town. That afternoon the landlady had found Mr. Radebaugh’s studio wrecked. He had broken all the furniture and windows, and torn the curtains and sheets into ribbons. The town policeman had found Mr. Radebaugh down by the river, singing meaningless songs to himself, and they had taken him to the insane asylum.

“But, why, Daddy?”

“That’s where they have to put people who go insane.”

“But he won’t be able to play the piano,” I pleaded. “He’ll die without his piano. Why don’t they put Mr. Deville in the insane asylum? He’s the one that made Mr. Radebaugh get insane.”

“I don’t know, son. I don’t know.”

The next summer we moved from Eggleton to Chicago. I never heard what happened to Mr. Radebaugh. I kept on playing the piano, but I never found a teacher as good as Dieter Radebaugh.