

The man who didn't like music

MARY was an engineer's wife. In fact, her marriage had interrupted a musical career for which she was studying at the conservatorium. Soon after their marriage, however, Rudolph opened a large engineering concern of his own. The work necessarily occupied a great deal of his time, and during the long hours Mary was left alone the piano became once again her companion.

Her husband disliked music. He might perhaps tolerate something light and catchy to soothe his jaded nerves at the end of the day's work, but the kind of music which Mary liked and played so well—no!

So she practised only in his absence.

If Rudolph should chance to come home unexpectedly and surprise her at the piano he would say: "Oh, hallo! Playing? But do you mind stopping now?" And Mary would cease immediately.

As time went on the engineer's business passed through a difficult period, and the work occupied more and more of Rudolph's time, so that his usual mid-day lunch hour became more irregular—one o'clock, one-thirty, or even two o'clock. While Mary waited for him she would play the piano or would watch out of the window for the tall thin form, walking with quick nervous steps through the broad maple alley with bent head—a head so full of daring plans and ideas.

But as surely as she played the piano to pass away the time of waiting Rudolph would suddenly open the door and catch her there. "Hallo, I am a bit late to-day—do you mind stopping now?" And Mary would hurry off to dish up their luncheon.

IT was a most strange coincidence. At first if Rudolph were very late she would think "I'll just play this through. No, perhaps I won't, he will be here at any moment now, and I won't be able to finish it."

And yet in spite of herself she would move over to the piano and begin to play. But scarcely had she finished the first page when Rudolph would appear in the doorway. "Do you mind . . ."

The maliciousness of fate in small matters is well enough known. The wise ones are those who know how to turn it to their own ends—and Mary, a conservatory student, did not lack intelligence.

"He will evidently come home as soon as I start playing." Once she tried it out when the time was slowly dragging on to one thirty. Rudolph almost at once appeared. "But of course," she reasoned to herself, "he would probably have been home by now, anyhow, it is so late."

But the next day she began playing shortly after one o'clock. The door creaked. Rudolph! Then she tried the experiment once again at twelve-thirty. The tired face of her husband appeared round the door.

She did dare to try much earlier because the business was Rudolph's first concern, and it must have his undivided attention, especially during these critical times.

Once she forgot herself and only twelve struck on the town hall clock when her white fingers began to run over the keys. "Hallo! But do you mind stopping now." Rudolph home by noon!

FROM now on their domestic life took on a regular and peaceful pattern. Promptly at twelve-thirty Mary went to the piano—no earlier because the factory still claimed Rudolph's close attention—and again shortly before seven, when dinner time approached. For she had now proved that to begin playing was to bring Rudolph home.

And once, when at last Dr. Frohlich, the young lawyer who held her so closely at a dance and who whispered such daring words—when at last this Dr. Frohlich boldly came to the house, to kneel at her feet and implore her: "Mary, will you play something for me? I heard you used to give your own concerts once."

Mary began to lift the black lid of the piano, but sprang back again as if in horror. The time was scarcely 4.30. For goodness sake she mustn't do that! Anything but that! For she suddenly saw what would go out of her life.

"After all I'm not such a good pianist as I was. I don't play much now you know—only for a few minutes at mid-day, and again in the evening."

But life can suddenly take unexpected turns. And here fate took a firmer grasp of events. One of the instruments in this case was a heavily laden truck carrying iron rods for the construction of the new building of Dusek's Ltd. So also were Messrs. Fwick and Dolezal, agents of an electrical firm who came to see Rudolph on business. So it was at a fairly advanced hour when these two gentlemen had arrived and were in the midst of their business conversation when at home Mary began to play Max Reger.

The unhappy husband hastened to finish his talk, and turned his hurried steps towards home. So it happened that he didn't notice in time the heavily laden truck bound for Dusek's new building.

When five minutes later Dr. Vicovsky amputated both his legs he was still alive and even murmured something about getting home quickly. But soon after he died. They broke the news to Mary just after she had restlessly played the last bars of a fugue.

NOW of course a very sad time followed. There was that young Dr. Frohlich, but Mary couldn't bring herself to think about him, and anyhow the whole town knew of his attentions to the certain Miss Stavel.

A SHORT STORY

Translated
from the Czech
by
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The piano was now silent—locked. Why bring back to life a wretched instrument which caused Rudolph's death?

One day, sitting alone in the twilight—that most melancholy hour of the day—Mary began to weep, remembering those by-gone days, and those hours when it was only necessary to start playing to bring Rudolph to the door.

She could picture him quite clearly, could see his tired face, a mask of apologetic irritation as he said: "Do you mind . . .!" It never failed. No, it had never failed!

Why had she not thought of it before? Hastily she searched the drawers till she found the key. "I will lift up the top of the piano so that it will be louder, for Rudolph is so far away now."

This time it was Moussorgsky she played—The Exhibition Pictures. The introduction to the Promenade had just begun when there were footsteps in the hall, and a familiar cough—Rudolph came in saying "Do you mind stopping?" He said it so kindly. She sprang up and ran to meet him, but he was gone. The moment she went back to the piano and played again he re-appeared and said once more: "Please, do you mind . . ." But now she took no notice of his words, but kept on playing for a long, long time.

She went through Gnom: Old Castle, Tuilleries, Ballet of the Chickens in Egg-shells, and the Kyjer's Great Gate.

Then she played from memory because she didn't dare to leave the piano to fetch more music. She played on and on and watched him sitting there on the sofa, so very vexed over the fate which had befallen him. But he was there! He was there!

She played all night long, although she didn't play very well, for not for a moment did her eyes slip down to the keyboard. She played on and on to the great distress of the other tenants in the house. She stopped only when day was dawning. With her head against the music rack she fell asleep.

WHEN the landlord came next morning for an explanation she told him the whole story. But the proprietor of a highly successful delicatessen shop is not necessarily impressed by the supernatural, and he told her firmly that such things must not happen again.

But what effect had the words of a hard-headed business man when she had it in her power to bring Rudolph back. How could she resist lifting the piano lid and beginning to play again as soon as the evening hour fell upon her sadness.

But the following evening Rudolph took advantage of a few bars of pianissimo to say: "Don't forget my poor legs, Mary; have pity on them, for I have a long way to go. So if you don't mind, not quite so often."

The landlord, who in spite of his more concrete view of life was a man of fine feelings, at last allowed the unhappy woman to enjoy her playing on Saturday nights only, after of course raising her rent 200 kc. a month. But she must play very quietly, and he therefore sent a man to unscrew the pedal, and forbade her to open the top of the piano.

SOME months passed in this way until one Saturday night the tenants were delighted to hear no more playing.

It appeared that Miss Stavel had lent her rosy ear to the blandishments of a young draughtsman in her father's factory, and this had in its turn brought about the immediate and penitent return of the young Dr. Frohlich.

One morning the tenants saw Capek the carrier, loading the piano on a truck and carrying it away.

Later, the town began whispering a tale about the 10-year-old Milada Spacek whose father had bought her a second hand piano to practise on. She had suddenly fallen ill with some strange kind of fever bordering on delirium in which she kept affirming that hardly had she sat down to the piano and struck a few chords when a vision appeared in the doorway and whispered, "Oh, I beg your pardon!" and vanished away. But this is only an unfounded rumour.