JACK'S FIRST CONCERT

By Lucille Baldwin Van Slyke.

How the Necessities of Genius Saved an Heirloom.

"I JUST adore the violin," sighed Betty, swinging the shears recklessly as she cut a picture of Kubelik from a magazine.

"Say, my father, he's got a peach of a violin," said Jack eagerly.

"Can you play on it?" asked Betty.

"Well—some," faltered the boy. "You see I just got started on it while he and mom were away last summer. I found it in the safe that time he wrote me the combination to get his papers out for him. I didn't s'pose he'd care, but I—he—I——"

"He what?" asked Betty excitedly.

Jack's voice trembled with rage at the memory.

"Aw, he gave me the deuce for touching it. He thinks I'm just a kid."

"Is it a Straddlyvarious?" asked Betty.

"Naw, it's an old thing my grandfather had, but I fixed it up good. First off, I tried my mandolin strings, but they didn't work, so I blew myself to a full set of strings, an'—well, then he came home."

Jack chewed vindictively at his apple core.

"I should think," pondered Betty reflectively, "that he'd like you to play it."

"Fathers make me dead tired," snorted Jack.

"Mine is simply noble," asserted Betty with dignity.

"Oh, it's different with girls; but, now, honest, Betty, he was dirt mean about it. And Ned Henson said he'd get me in his brother's orchestra if I'd learn."

"Really?" gasped the girl. "Why, Jacky—at those swell concerts they give, too?"

"Yep," said Jack, trying to be modest.

"Jack, could you get me and Nell an invite if you belonged?"

"Oh, I'll belong all right," he boasted. "I'm thinking about getting a violin any day now."

Betty held the picture at arm's length and eyed it rapturously.

"Isn't his hair grand and long?" she questioned musingly. "Say, you know my anut, Madge Seymour? Well, she was introduced to him last winter and he shook hands with her. She let me see the gloves she had on that day. She isn't ever going to wear them again, and they're a perfectly new four-dollar pair, too."

"My hair's most as long as that when I'm playing football," observed Jack.

Betty sniffed.

"Football!" she scoffed. "Anybody can play football."

"Oh, can they?" taunted Jack. "Well, your own brother can't. He was the rottenest——"

"He was not!" snapped Betty. "And, anyway, my mother is glad he got put off the team; and it was just jealousy, he says, anyhow."

She resumed her study of the violinist's picture.

"Violins just make me cry," she confided. "My father took me to a concert in New York last winter and I—say, Jack, when you shut your eyes and listen your soul just floats and floats. Gee, I love it!"

Jack jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Why didn't you say so before?" he grumbled. "I'd be playing for you every day by now. I like it myself, but nobody ever encourages me."

"Hum," said Betty scornfully, "encouragement isn't all there is to it. Fred knows a fellow over on the hill who got an awfully nice violin from his uncle for Christmas last year and his father paid eight dollars and fifty cents for some lessons and he can only play one scale and that sounds perfectly awful. He told Fred he wished he could swap it for something he liked."

"Where does that fellow live?" demanded Jack.

"In that ugly yellow house on Oxford Street—the one with the pink iron dogs in front. 'Course he's quite young, even younger than Fred; but if he had any genius he could play. Kubelik did." She returned to her dreamy study of the picture. "He played simply elegant when he was six years old."

"Looks as if he wore the same tie yet," growled Jack.

"That's just too sweet!" insisted Betty quickly. "Anybody can wear stiff old things like you boys. I think it looks better than that silly thing you've got on."

Jack was late that night for dinner. He rushed madly to his room with a bulky parcel and tried to slide into his seat unnoticed. He was rubbing his hands on his napkin and trying to do his nails with a toothpick under the friendly shelter of the tablecloth when the inevitable questions came.

"Nowheres," he announced, beginning his soup noisily. "Nowheres at all."

"You mean not anywhere," reproved Kate.

"I don't. I mean nowheres," he muttered. "Gee, you don't talk so grand if you did get 'A' in English."

"Mrs. Perry said the girls could come over to play cards with us to-night," rejoined his sister; "but if you're going to act so grouchy we won't let you play."

"Don't want to," answered Jack promptly. "I'm too busy to fool away my time like that."

Wailing, whining sounds floated over the stairway a little later in the evening. Spot, dozing behind the sofa, lifted his head and howled. Mr. Richard's door opened violently.

"Who's making that infernal noise?" he demanded.

"We don't know," chorused the card players.

"Must be Jack," suggested Kate sweetly. "The rest of us are just as still! Shall I call him?"

"What do you want?" yelled the delinquent crossly from the head of the stairs. "I told you I didn't want to get in your old game. I'm busy."

Derisive laughter greeted this remark, laughter that stopped abruptly as Mr. Richard called to his son.

"John, I should like you to come downstairs."

Jack came, awkwardly holding a violin bow behind him.

"Were you making that strange noise?"

"Yes, I——"

"What have you in your hand?"

Jack held it out sulkily.

"Did I or did I not tell you last summer that you were to leave that violin alone?"

"'Tisn't your violin," answered Jack with a curious little light of victory in his gray eyes. "It's my very own."

"Your own?" asked his bewildered father. "Where did you get it?"

"Off a fellow over in Oxford Street."

"Indeed. Well, where did you get the money to buy it with?

"Didn't have money. Just traded old truck for it."

"Well?" prompted his father.

"You said you were tired of their burrowing up the lawn," began the boy virtuously, "And it was a fierce job always feeding them and——"

"Whyee," protested the indignant Kate. "Jack Richard, you know those rabbits are half mine. You've got no right——"

"They are not," retorted Jack hotly. "You gave up your half in 'em for my letting you have all the tennis racket for yours."

"Children, don't wrangle," said Mr. Richard sharply. "Is that all you gave this youth for the fiddle, John?"

"'Most all," stammered Jack. "Just some old stuff. I let him have my year-before-last skates ——"

"I—I—I w-w-w-want th-those sk-skates," sobbed the "baby" suddenly. "You said you'd teach me on 'em when it was winter. You know you did."

"I did not," denied Jack. "I said if your feet got large enough, and they aren't! And I said if you stopped being such a cry baby and you're crying now this minute."

"That will do," interposed their father sternly. "You will all keep still while John answers me. Now, John, tell me exactly what you gave the boy for this violin."

"Th' rabbits an' th' old skates an' five of th' old phonograph records and my air rifle with the broken barrel and the old hose you threw away down to the stable and eight hundred and forty-two cigar coupons."

Mr. Richard's head went up in one of his rare noiseless laughs.

Jack grinned back happily.

"Honest, it's a terrible good violin, papa," he said; "just take a look at the bow. It's an awfully good bow; it pulls just as easy! And the boy gave me a whole lot of rosin for nothing."

His father regarded the bow with a sigh.

"Run along," he said; "but for Heaven's sake go into the storeroom chamber. Spot and I can't stand that unearthly racket if it is a bargain."

Of course Jack had dimly realized for some years that true genius is never appreciated at the start, but the disloyalty of his immediate family was a great shock to him. He endured their taunts with remarkable fortitude, for he found a solace for all his boyish woes in the storeroom chamber. His mother, tender-hearted, came to the rescue at length with a most charming and surreptitious arrangement for some lessons with a young student.

"I do not approve of family secrets as a rule," she said, "but really, Jack, your father does not like to hear you play, and so if you will promise never to practise when he is in the house I will pay for the lessons."

To Betty he poured out his soul in these days. Never before had he felt he had any secure hold on that imperious little lady's affections; but in this she thoroughly sympathized with him. The day when Ned Henson's brother was prevailed upon to admit him to the sacred realms of the orchestra as a substitute member, he marched to the corner drug store and dropped a precious nickel in the telephone slot.

"Say, Betty," he confided rapturously, "guess what's happened? He's let me in! That is, 'most in. I can go to all the rehearsals, and I'm the second-violin substitute!"

"Do you think you'll get to be first before the concert?" came in happy tones over the wire.

"Well, not quite," he confessed; "but I might get to be the first-violin substitute or the really second violin. Say, I can't talk any more 'cause I'm in a drug store. I didn't call up at our house for fear the kids would hear everything."

The clandestine thrill that came over the wires was quite worth his extravagance.

"Nobody knows I'm talking to you either," giggled Betty. "I shut the hall door when you said it was you! I'm awfully proud of you. I bet everybody will be surprised to see what you can do."

"I guess they will," exulted Jack. "And look here, Betty, anyhow I can get you and Nell those tickets for the concert. They're going to have it in the Hensons' new barn this year and have Jap lanterns and lemonade and the Virginia reel and a whole slew of things doing."

The cruel interruption of Central and the lack of another nickel broke in upon the rapturous account of all these anticipated joys, but the boy rushed home to excited conferences with mother and still more faithful hours of practice.

Rosy visions of his father on his knees begging his proud son to accept the family heirloom, exquisite thoughts of the time when he could play the now somewhat wabby serenades beneath Betty's window, and the more mercenary hopes of the enormous moneys Henson's Apollo Orchestra would accrue when the world appreciated them; all these things made the storeroom chamber a heavenly retreat.

During the anxious month before the concert the second violin fell obligingly ill with scarlet fever. After the first flush of joy Jack's conscience brought him with lagging feet to his mother's door.

"'Course I didn't really pray about it," he confided shyly; "or anything so bad as that; but I wished it so awful hard that something would happen to him, that I feel as if I'd made him sick."

After she comforted him he put his arms around her neck and wheedled. "There's one thing about it, but I'm most sure you can manage that. Fred's brother says I ought to wear long pants."

"Those boys are older than you, dear," she objected.

"Not so very much," he insisted; "and anyway it would look pretty foolish if I didn't. Don't you suppose if you asked father real loving, and told him just how it was, and how I would be ever so careful of them and not wear them except for best and not tease to wear them to school——"

"My dear son," she smiled, "I have very little idea he would agree to any such proposition; you are not very large for your age and——"

"Aw, mamma," he burst out petulantly, "I'll bet he wore 'em when he was younger than me! He's just mean to me, he is! He don't never—er ever ——"

HE RUSHED HEADLONG INTO THE ROOM.

"John Forbes Richard," said his mother sternly, "do you think I am going to sit here and listen to your abuse of your father and then go and ask him a very great favor for you?"

"Please ask him!" pleaded the boy. "Please do and I'll be so good—I'll be good always!"

But even managed with his mother's most exquisite tact the interview with Mr. Richard was unsuccessful, and poor Jack spent another week in despair. He was obliged at length to confess this new sorrow to Betty. She sympathized and pondered over the problem. Suddenly she flushed and began to stammer in the midst of her regrets.

"Jack," she faltered nervously, "I'm going to do a perfectly dreadful thing. Pr'bably you'll think I'm perfectly terrible,, but I——"

He found himself blushing painfully at her rosy distress and he walked to the other end of the room.

"If it's anything you've got to tell me that you don't like to," he said chivalrously, "I'll turn my back while you say it. You ought to feel perfectly free to tell me 'most anything after my telling about my pants," he ended stiffly.

"It's about those," murmured Betty faintly. "You won't get mad if I tell you a plan about them, will you?"

"Mad?" questioned Jack tenderly. "I'd be the gladdest fellow!"

"Then turn your back again," she commanded. "I—I—I well, I—are you sure you aren't going to be mad? I—I—will get you some out of Cousin Jim's closet if you'll never go and tell on me and if you'll bring them right back. He left some when he went to military school. I saw them hanging on the line when Aunt Eleanor cleaned house last week."

"Bettina," he said solemnly, "I don't deserve such saccerfices as you and my mother make for me; but when I get older—if I ever do—" He turned away speechless. In the light of this noble support he felt he could accomplish almost anything.

The afternoon before the concert he laboriously pressed them after he had smuggled the ironing board up to the storeroom chamber and silently stolen up and down three flights of stairs every time the iron grew cold.

He hurried through his dinner with smiling glances at his mother from time to time. One of these happy grins was interrupted by a stern remark from his father.

"John, didn't I give you a quarter last Friday to have your hair cut?"

"I've got it in my pocket," faltered Jack. "I didn't just get time yet."

"Your hair looks like a Fiji Islander's," said Mr. Richard. " I don't want to speak about its untidy condition again. You may go to the shop to-morrow on your way from school."

Jack breathed more freely. His beloved locks were safe for the evening. "I'll do it," he agreed hurriedly. "I'm sorry I didn't get time."

After dinner was over he lingered until his father's cigar was lighted.

"Say, dad," he said nervously, "mother said I could go to a little party in Ned Henson's barn, and she said I could stay all night with him if you said I could."

"Have you all your lessons?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure Edward consulted his parents before asking you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, just this once," he conceded.

As Jack plunged joyously upstairs to dress it seemed to him his life had never been so full of bliss. When he was nearly dressed he tiptoed to his small brother's room and came back with that youngster's Sunday tie. As he dreamily adjusted the Windsor before his mirror he smiled. He rummaged in the bureau a moment more and brought out the counterpart of Betty's picture of the violinist and patted his hair anxiously into place with one eye on the picture. "It's 'most as long," he breathed as he reached under his bed for his violin case and drew out the instrument to try the dramatic effect.

He groped in vain for the bow. In its accustomed place he found a slender stick from Kate's fish-pond game. A scrap of paper dangled from its foolish little tin hook. The paper, uncrumpled, revealed this cruel bit of verse:

Smartie, smartie,
Went to a party.
Didn't get his sister asked to it.
He asked some girls
With dark brown curls,
But when he got there he had a fit.
Go play with this on your old fiddle.
Then I just guess those girls will giggle.

He paled with rage at this dastardly blow. He did not dare go into the library in his borrowed clothes. There was not time to dress again; the minutes were already ticking ominously away. He knew now why that fiendish Kate had settled herself under her father's lamp with her algebra. He turned her room topsy-turvy in a vain search. Finally he stole in despair to his mother's sitting-room in hopes she could help him. But she, too, was downstairs.

In the alcove back of her sewing screen was his grandfather's huge old safe. Jack paused. Could he remember the combination? He tried it gently, fumbling in the dim light. He flushed with joy as the door swung slowly open.

"I'll just take it for to-night," he murmured. "I'm sure my own grandfather wouldn't care if I borrowed his bow. I'll bet he'd be glad to have me do it."

He sighed as he touched the familiar instrument, still bearing the strings he had put upon it last summer.

"Mine squeaks so fierce," he thought regretfully. He shut the door of the safe hurriedly a few seconds later as he heard some one coming up the stairs. When he rushed out of the house his guilty little heart was beating wildly.

Betty and Nell greeted his late arrival with many exciting comments, but he rushed them along.

"Were they all right?" whispered Betty meaningly. "I was scared stiff for fear they weren't."

"They're fine," he whispered back politely. "Your cousin has fine taste even if he is just a little taller than me."

"Then why didn't you hurry?" she grumbled. "You know it begins at half past seven and you know I have to be home by ten."

The concert was a great success. The lanterns gleamed softly in the evergreens and bunting. The musician's platform very obligingly held together until the last number. Everybody had a beautiful laugh when it did fall, and the most blissful of all the orchestra's own meager refreshments of lemonade and popcorn was generously augmented by an unlimited supply of pink ice cream from Ned Henson's wonderful mother.

But in spite of all these joys, in spite of Betty's smiles, in spite even of the exquisitely funny remarks of his male friends about his having "panta-rooms to rent," Jack's face was pitifully sober at times. After he and Ned had escorted his small charges home he hung reluctantly at the corner.

"Say, Ned," he said, interrupting the other's bubbling reminiscence of the evening, "I guess I'll cart my truck home and come over some other night."

"You will not," asserted Ned promptly. "He'll never say you can again for a year, and you know it. Besides," he added temptingly, "I thought up a bully joke for us to play on Jim, and anyhow you haven't got a key."

"I suppose they wouldn't expect me," agreed Jack, hesitatingly.

In the morning he insisted on going home before breakfast. His awkward thanks to his hostess and his evident haste were a rather dubious compliment to the Henson hospitality.

The family were not at breakfast when he reached home; they were all talking excitedly in the upstairs sitting room. Through the doorway he caught a glimpse of a policeman and an open safe. He remembered with awful distinctness that he had not locked the safe when he shut it.

He fled wildly to the storeroom chamber and sat down in a miserable heap. Twice he opened the door and tried to go downstairs; twice he shut it quickly in his fright. It seemed to him he could never face his father. At last he crawled slowly downstairs. They were all in the library now; he could hear his father's voice distinctly.

"The silver they dropped when I gave the alarm. Mrs. Richard's jewelry was in another part of the house so they overlooked that. All they really have is a little money, some of the children's trinkets, and the violin. But as I said before, that is a serious loss. It is not only an expensive old one, but it belonged to my father and I value it highly on that account."

Jack's heart gave a mighty thump and he rushed headlong int othe room.

"They didn't get it! They didn't get it!" he cried shrilly. "They just got my rinky, dinky old fiddle!"

His amazed audience listened eagerly to his somewhat incoherent explanations.

"Kate took my bow, so I had to have one. And while I was getting it the violin looked so much nicer I—I—I had to take it. I was going to put it straight back this morning but I'm 'fraid I—I—I l-l-left the door open," he finished bravely; "so everything else is my fault."

When the others were gone they faced each other.

"You can whip me even if I am big," stammered the boy, "I know I 'serve it, papa."

His father picked up the violin and looked at it for a long time before he spoke.

"John," he said finally, "your grandfather and I quarreled bitterly about this violin once. He wanted me to play on it and I didn't want to."

Jack stared.

"And then," said his father quietly, "he died just after that."

Jack looked miserably at the floor.

"So that is why I felt I could hardly give it to a little boy for a plaything. Do you think you understand?"

Another long silence. Jack kept on staring stupidly at the rug. Finally he looked up shyly. His father was holding out the violin to him.

"Will you always be careful of it?" he asked softly.

The choking in Jack's throat grew intolerable. Suddenly he flung himself at his father.

"Hug me a bear hug again," he snuffled. "Just one 'fore I get too old! We—we—we w-w-on' ever scrap again, will we, daddy?"