

THE GENIUS

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IT WAS a September night. Little Isidore Levine tossed on his hard bed and closed his eyes tightly. It was so warm in the room! He wondered if winter would ever come again. In the next room he could hear low voices. His father and mother had a visitor. Would they never cease talking?

Isidore was so tired; he couldn't stop thinking such wonderful things. He was in a concert hall. A quartet was playing chamber music—it was a Russian program, Arensky, Glazounow—and his heart leaped up, child as he was, at the music of the steppes, the forests, the rushing streams.

What were they talking about in there? Oh, those lessons, those dreaded history and grammar lessons, the alphabet marching like battalions of soldiers across the weary pages! How he hated school!

At night, when the lamp was lit, he spent hours poring over his books. His father would peer over his steel spectacles, watching the boy quietly, and would look up from his Yiddish newspaper to tell Isidore how fortunate he was to have a chance to learn, and what a wonderful place America was.

Now, as he lay on the bed, Isidore could hear the cries of the children in the streets, playing those marvelous games of action and adventure, games in which he was never allowed to join. Oh, how he wanted to cry!

All at once the door was opened softly. Looking up, Isidore saw his father's face, lit by the candle he was holding. Behind him was another spectacled face—such a funny, grinning face!

"You sleep, Isidore?" asked his father almost caressingly.

The little boy's heart responded to the kindness of the tone.

"No!" he whispered.

"So this is the little musician?" said the owner of the funny face.

"Yes, this is my son. Isidore, I have news for you. Mr. Strunsky will give you lessons by the piano. Tomorrow you go to him, and every afternoon. That is good, eh?"

Isidore drew in his breath, and, too much moved to answer, nodded his head. The faces at the door withdrew, and he

was alone. Oh, how happy he was now, how happy!

The next afternoon his mother—a strange, stout creature with hands equally ready to caress and to slap—took him to his new taskmaster. Mr. Strunsky lived in Second avenue, in an almost swell house. There was a card in the window next to the door which read:

"Morris Strunsky—Music Studio—Fifty Cents an Hour."

"Such a chance!" his mother repeated as she puffed up the steps with him, pointing to the sign. "And for you only a quarter!"

Without explaining why the professor's rates should be so favorable, she rang the bell. Mr. Strunsky himself answering it, Isidore was transferred to his care, after elaborate greetings on both sides.

Mr. Strunsky led Isidore into the largest living-room he had ever seen. In one corner stood a piano. There was a well-worn carpet on the floor, and much dingy furniture. Innumerable photographs, fixed in a network of dusty strings on the walls, gave some indication of the master's succession of pupils.

Mr. Strunsky, still smiling, though Isidore began to find something to frighten him in the musician's grin, led the boy to a huge chair and made him sit down. He examined his new pupil's hands. Isidore was glad they were clean.

The professor nodded and stared again, then with a sigh clapped Isidore on the head.

"Good boy!" he said, and stared again. How delicate the little fellow looked, and what large eyes he had! "You don't eat good," the master announced suddenly.

"Always two helps," answered Isidore shyly, wondering what it all meant.

"Then it don't stick," said Mr. Strunsky regretfully. "But come you by the piano. Your papa say you play a little by ear. Let me hear you, and do not be afraid. I am very kind to little boys who are good. See?"

Isidore stared at the piano. Some earlier pupil had scratched a rude face on the polish, and it seemed to leer menacingly. It somehow reminded him of Mr. Strunsky, who was standing near the window lighting a long pipe.

He gave a choked gasp, and struck a timid chord; then he began to play. As his slim fingers found the keys the room began to fade away. Oh, what wonderful sounds he could make!

Suddenly he heard a voice say:

"That is fine! Stop! What is it you play, my boy? I do not know it. What is it?"

"I don't know," Isidore faltered in a whisper. "It comes by me—just."

"You are afraid of me. So!" said Mr. Strunsky, coming over and putting his hand under his chin.

Isidore felt his heart beat; then he looked up into the old man's face. There was something so tender and encouraging in Mr. Strunsky's eyes that fear fell away from the boy.

"No," he whispered, "I am not afraid—now!"

Mr. Strunsky smiled sadly, and then grinned.

"Good! Then we make of you a fine musician. Yes, we will show them! Do not be afraid of me any more—ever. I will make of you a great man; but first, yes, first, you must learn such a lot!"

And in perfect trust Isidore entered upon his career.

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II.

OH, WHAT dreadful days followed! Those black heads with tails, those curious and perplexing symbols to be committed to memory, the endless repetition of scales and exercises in which he heard no music! Mr. Strunsky, with a pencil ready to rap his fingers if he made a mistake, alternately scolding and caressing him; at one moment beaming with his queer, wrinkled face, and then bellowing with scorn and impatient vituperation!

Isidore was alternately a genius, a fool, a good-for-nothing, a wonder; but out of it all emerged the fact that he was progressing with unheard-of rapidity.

One evening Mr. Strunsky came to the boy's father.

"It is done, my friend; you must get him a better teacher now. I will recommend him to Herr Schule—such a great man! For nothing, I am sure, he will take Isidore. One day your boy will make much

money, my friend; so feed him well. A good nourishment is a fine thing for so nervous a boy."

After that Isidore was conscious that his parents were trying to do all they could for him. He was fed with unlimited eggs and milk, and his mother would feel his thin little arms with a queer smile. When it rained he was never allowed to go out without a pair of high rubbers, and he had a fine, thick overcoat.

Mr. Strunsky came one day and took him to the great Herr Schule, with whom the old man held a long whispered conversation. Then Isidore had to play, while Herr Schule pulled his black beard and nodded approvingly.

"I take him, yes—for your sake, my old comrade, and because I think I can make something of him."

So Isidore had to begin all over again, for his new teacher had a method of his own.

At his school breaking-up day Isidore played a piece, and a woman reporter who had strayed in wrote a paragraph for her newspaper about a little Russian prodigy. The notice was cut out, and traveled about the East Side in his mother's purse, for the Levines had many friends, but Herr Schule was terribly annoyed.

"To put ideas into the boy's head—what nonsense! Yes, some day, but now—no! He plays no more in public till I say."

And that was Isidore's last appearance in public till three years later. He was shooting up into a weedy boy, still frail, but his arms were strong. Only at times, when he had been practicing for hours, he felt pains in his back and saw black spots swim before his eyes.

He had remorseless taskmasters, who kept him at his work; Herr Schule, because he had never known what it was to be tired; and his parents, because they had visions of money to be so easily earned by a child who must surely be grateful for the care they had lavished on him. And something of this entered into Isidore's consciousness. Perhaps, if he made a lot of money, his father would let him rest a little.

If only he might rest and play, as other boys did! When he practiced he could hear them calling to one another outside,