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by

Charmian Kittredge

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This lady introduced us to her husband, a genial, well-to-do citizen of Ukiah, and soon we were aware of the groping entrance of Valentine, the wonder-child. I had expected to be touched by the sight of the little blind face, but was hardly prepared for anything so pathetic as the reality. At his mother's "Valentine, this lady has come all the way from San Francisco to hear you play," the boy walked to me with both hands outstretched, his pale face flushing slightly. When my arms went about him, he put up his rosy, sensitive mouth to be kissed and confidently settled himself in my lap in the most engaging manner, but with never a smile. In fact, the only mirth we were able to get out of him during the visit was later on, when we took his picture. The click of the kodak seemed to please him immensely, for he laughed merrily and heartily over and over again.

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I made a rapid mental study of the little man on my knee, and with growing admiration and amazement. He is well grown for his age—straight and slim in figure, and not sickly, despite the esthetic pallor of his complexion, which is tinged delicately now and then when he is under excitement. His face is oval and the pitiful sightless eyes are well set and almost intelligent in expression. The head is unmistakably that of a musician, with short brown hair growing straight up in a natural "pompadour" from a low, smooth forehead. I looked in vain for the slight-

est resemblance to his parents, and the latter assured me that they had been unable to trace in him even a passing likeness to any of his relatives.

Valentine's feet are noticeably small and shapely and his hands are of such a marvelous pattern that it would seem as if mental training is all that is required to make of this child a great pianist. The hands are broad, white and firm in texture, and amazingly flexible; and I noticed that the usual "web" stricture between the knuckles seems to have been done away with altogether and replaced by rubber, so elastic is the feeling. The long and somewhat flat fingers taper very little and are quite square at the ends and very strong. His mother says Valentine is intolerant of uncleanliness, and of his own accord keeps his hands spotless.

During these observations Mrs. Miller answered questions regarding the development of Valentine's musical gift.

"When he was yet a baby in long clothes," she said, "we one day took him over to Vichy Springs. During the afternoon some one was playing 'After the Ball' on the piano, and we noticed that the baby kept nodding his head in perfect time with the waltz. Presently he began making little crooning noises, and then we were all astonished to find he was humming a measure or two with the piano! We could hardly believe our ears; but he repeated his little performance over and over again. We did not know then that he was blind," with a pathetic look toward her son. "These musical noises were the first really intelligent ones he made, for he did not begin to talk at all until he was two and a half years old."

We were given to understand that neither of Valentine's parents has the least musical bent or the slightest practical knowledge of music; and so far as they know, none of their relatives living or dead has ever been noted for ability in this direction. Indeed, Valentine seems to stand alone and original in his surprising talent as well as in his personal appearance. Until he was five years old the only music he heard at home was ground out of a small music-box. This he kept running most of the time, however, and nothing in his little world pleased him so

much as to sit and listen to "Home, Sweet Home," "Way Down Upon the Swanee River," "Old Black Joe," and like airs.

"He would sit all day and sing with the music-box if we would let him," Mrs. Miller continued, "and it has always been hard to get him to play outdoors with the other boys. He would leave them continually, and come to me and say, 'Wind up the box, mamma.' When he was five an uncle bought him a zither and it was n't a week before he could pick out on the strings all the tunes in his old music-box, and an endless lot of little things he composed himself. Will you play on the zither now, dear?"

Valentine manifested his perfect willingness by leaving my lap and seating himself on a low rocker, while his mother brought the zither and laid it across his knees.

The little fellow swept his hand over the strings with the grace and skill of an expert and promptly remarked, with a slight frown, "The new string is out of tune again, mamma. Give me the key, please."

With the big key he tightened the refractory string and also one or two of the others, all the while murmuring in a low, tuneful monotone, without waiting for answers:—

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listened, mute, to the clear, well-fingered chords and melodies drawn from the instrument.

"He's done it all himself, too,—never even a hint from anybody," Mr. Miller put in proudly, passing his big hand lovingly over the boy's bowed head.

"Shall I play on the piano now?" said the little artist. That was just what we were waiting for; so we gladly moved to an inner room, his mother explaining that the piano had been in the house only two weeks and that previously Valentine had touched one only a few times in his life.

"We bought this piano at 'second-hand,'" Mrs. Miller stated, "and though a very good make, it is out of tune just a little. Valentine is much distressed about it, though the rest of us hardly notice anything wrong."

She then led the boy to the piano, and without a second's hesitation he pointed out three or four keys which he said were out of tune. They were not badly so, but his keen ear had detected the imperfection before the piano had been an hour in the house.

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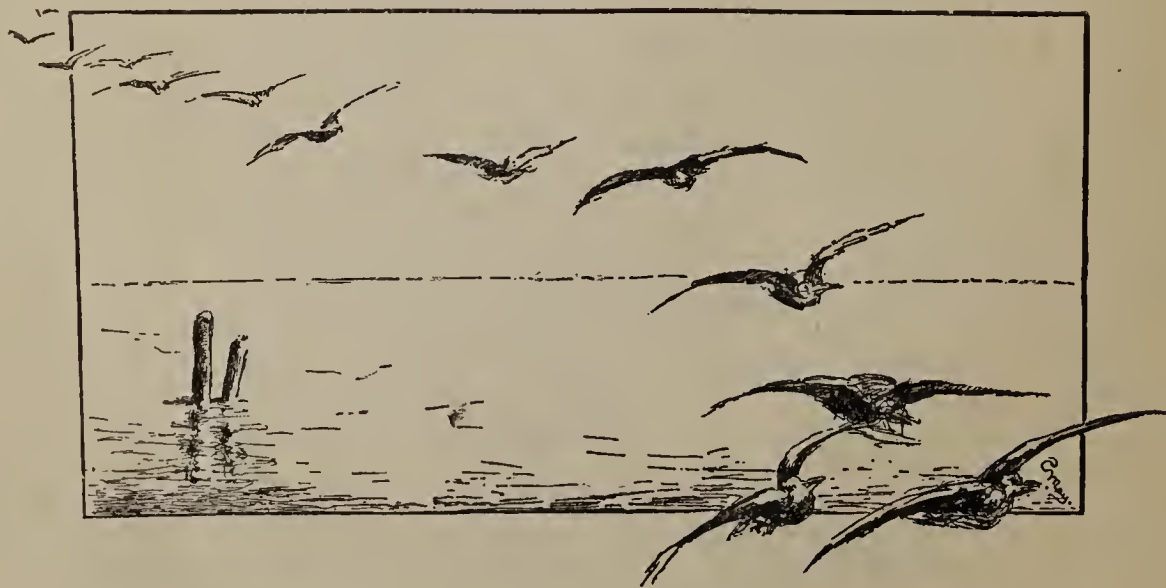
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