

"The Captive Outfielder"
by. Leonard Wibberly

The boy was filled with anxiety, which seemed to concentrate in his stomach and gave him a sense of tightness there, as if his stomach were all knotted up into a ball and would never come undone again. He had his violin under his chin, and before him was the music stand, and on the walls of the studio the pictures of the great musicians were frowning upon him in massive disapproval. Right behind him on the wall was a portrait of Paganini, and he positively glowered down at the boy, full of malevolence and impatience.

That, said the boy to himself, is because he could really play the violin and I can't and never will be able to. And he knows it and thinks I'm a fool.

Below Paganini was a portrait of Mozart, in profile. He had a white wig tied neatly at the back with a bow of black ribbon. Mozart should have been looking straight ahead, but his left eye, which was the only one visible, seem to be turned a little, watching the boy. The look was one of disapproval. When Mozart was the boy's age--that is, ten--he had already composed several pieces and could play the violin and the organ. Mozart didn't like the boy either.

On the other side of the Paganini portrait was the blocky face of Johann Sebastian Bach. It was a grim face, bleak with disappointment. Whenever the boy was playing it seemed to him that Johann Sebastian Bach was shaking his head in resigned disapproval of his efforts. There were other portraits around the studio--Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin. Not one of them was smiling. They were all in agreement that this boy was certainly the poorest kind of musician and never would learn his instrument, and it was painful to them to have to listen to him while he had his lesson.

Of all these great men of music who surrounded him the boy hated Johann Sebastian Bach the most. This was because his teacher, Mr. Olinsky, kept talking about Bach as if without Bach there never would have been any music. Bach was like a god to Mr. Olinsky, and he was a god the boy could never hope to please.

"All right," said Mr. Olinsky, who was at the grand piano. "The arioso. And you will kindly remember the time. Without time no one can play the music of Johann Sebastian Bach." Mr. Olinsky exchanged glances with the portrait of Bach, and the two seemed in perfect agreement with each other. The boy was quite sure that the two of them carried on disheartened conversations about him after his lesson.

There was a chord from the piano. The boy put the bow to the string and started. But it was no good. At the end of the second bar Mr. Olinsky took his hands from the piano and covered his face with them and shook his head, bending over the keyboard. Bach shook his head too. In the awful silence all the portraits around the studio expressed their disapproval, and the boy felt more wretched than ever and not too far removed from tears.

"The time," said Mr. Olinsky eventually. "The time. Take that first bar. What is the value of the first note?"

"A quarter note," said the boy.

"And the next note?"

"A sixteenth."

"Good. So you have one quarter note and four sixteenth notes making a bar of two quarters. Not so?"

"Yes."

"But the first quarter note is tied to the first sixteenth note. They are the same note. So the first note, which is C sharp, is held for five sixteenths, and then the other three sixteenths follow. Not so?"

"Yes," said the boy.

"THEN WHY DON'T YOU PLAY IT THAT WAY?"

To this the boy made no reply. The reason he didn't play it that way was that he couldn't play it that way. It wasn't fair to have a quarter note. It was just a dirty trick like Grasshopper Smith pulled when he was pitching in the Little League. Grasshopper Smith was on the Giants, and the boy was on the Yankees. The Grasshopper always retained the ball for just a second after he seemed to have thrown it and struck the boy out. Every time. Every single time. The boy got a hit every now and again from other pitchers. Once he got a two-base hit. The ball went joyously through the air, bounced and went over the center-field fence. A clear, good two-base hit. But it was a relief pitcher. And whenever Grasshopper Smith was in the box, the boy struck out. He and Johann Sebastian Bach. They were full of dirty tricks. They were pretty stuck-up too. He hated them both

Meanwhile he had not replied to Mr. Olinsky's question, and Mr. Olinsky got up from the piano and stood beside him, and looked at him, and saw that the boy's eyes were bright with frustration and disappointment because he was not good at baseball and no good at music either.

"Come and sit down a minute, boy," said Mr. Olinsky, and led him over to a little wickerwork sofa.

Mr. Olinsky was in his 60s, and from the time he was this boy's age he had given all his life to music. He loved the boy, though he had known him for only a year. He was a good boy, and he had a good ear. He wanted him to get excited about music, and the boy was not excited about it. He didn't practice properly. He didn't apply himself. There was something lacking, and it was up to him, Mr. Olinsky, to supply whatever it was that was lacking so that the boy would really enter into the magic world of music.

How to get to him then? How to make a real contact with this American boy when he himself was, though a citizen, foreign-born?

He started to talk about his own youth. It had been a very grim youth in Petrograd. His parents were poor. His father had died when he was young, and his mother had, by a very great struggle, got him into the conservatory. She had enough money for his tuition only. Eating was a great problem. He could afford only one good meal a day at the conservatory cafeteria so that he was almost always hungry and cold. But he remembered how the great Glazunov had come to the cafeteria one day and had seen him with a bowl of soup and a piece of bread.

"This boy is much too thin," Glazunov had said. "From now on he is to have two bowls of soup, and they are to be big bowls. I will pay the cost."

There had been help like that for him--occasional help coming quite unexpectedly--in those long, grinding, lonely years at the conservatory. But there were other terrible times. There was the time when he had

reached such an age that he could no longer be boarded at the conservatory. He had to give up his bed to a smaller boy and find lodgings somewhere in the city.

He had enough money for lodgings, but not enough for food. Always food. That was the great problem. To get money for food he had taken a room in a house where the family had consumption. They rented him a room cheaply because nobody wanted to board with them. He would listen to the members of the family coughing at night time--the thin, shallow, persistent cough of the consumptive. He was terribly afraid--afraid that he would contract consumption himself, which was incurable in those days, and die. The thought of death frightened him. But he was equally frightened of disappointing his mother, for if he died he would not graduate, and all her efforts to make him a musician would be wasted.

Then there was the time he had had to leave Russia after the revolution, and the awful months of standing in line to get a visa and then to get assigned to a train. It had taken seven months. And the train to Riga--what an ordeal that had been. Normally it took 18 hours. But this train took three weeks. Three weeks in cattle cars in midwinter, jammed up against his fellow passengers, desperately trying to save his violin from being crushed. A baby had died in the cattle car, and the mother kept pretending it was only asleep. They had had to take it from her by force eventually and bury it beside the tracks out in the howling loneliness of the countryside.

And out of all this he had got music. He had become a musician. Not a concert violinist, but a greater orchestral violinist devoted to his art.

He told the boy about this and hoped to get him to understand what he himself had gone through in order to become a musician. But when he was finished, he knew he had not reached the boy.

That is because he is an American boy, Mr. Olinsky thought. He thinks all these things happened to me because I am a foreigner, and these things don't happen in America. And maybe they don't. But can't he understand that if I made all these efforts to achieve music--to be able to play the works of Johann Sebastian Bach as Bach wrote them--it is surely worth a little effort on his part?

But it was no good. The boy, he knew, sympathized with him. But he had not made a real contact with him. He hadn't found the missing something that separated this boy from him and the boy from music. He tried again. "Tell me," he said, "what do you do with your day?"

"I go to school," said the boy flatly.

"But after that? Life is not all school."

"I play ball."

"What kind of ball?" asked Mr. Olinsky. "Bouncing a ball against a wall?"

"No," said the boy. "Baseball."

"Ah," said Mr. Olinsky. "Baseball." And he sighed. He had been more than 30 years in the United States, and he didn't know anything about baseball. It was an activity beneath his notice. When he had any spare time, he went to a concert. Or sometimes he played chess. "And how do you do at baseball?" he said.

"Oh--not very good. That Grasshopper Smith. He always strikes me out."

"You have a big match coming up soon perhaps?"

"A game. Yes. Tomorrow. The Giants against the Yankees. I'm on the Yankees. It's the play-off. We are both tied for first place." For a moment he seemed excited, and then he caught a glimpse of the great musicians around the wall and the bleak stare of Johann Sebastian Bach, and his voice went dull again. "It doesn't matter," he said. "I'll be struck out."

"But that is not the way to think about it," said Mr. Olinsky. "Is it inevitable that you be struck out? Surely that cannot be so. When I was a boy--" Then he stopped, because when he was a boy he had never played anything remotely approaching baseball, and so he had nothing to offer the boy to encourage him.

Here was the missing part then--the thing that was missing between him and the boy, and the thing that was missing between the boy and Johann Sebastian Bach. Baseball. It was just something they didn't have in common, and so they couldn't communicate with each other.

"When is this game?" said Mr. Olinsky.

"Three in the afternoon," said the boy.

"And this Grasshopper Smith is your bete noire--your black beast, huh?"

"Yeah," said the boy. And he'll be pitching. They've been saving him for this game."

Mr. Olinsky sighed. This was a long way from the arioso. "Well," he said, "we will consider the lesson over. Do your practice and we will try again next week."

The boy left, conscious that all the musicians were watching him. When he had gone, Mr. Olinsky stood before the portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach.

"Baseball, maestro," he said. "Baseball. That is what stands between him and you and him and me. You had 20 children and I had none. But I am positive that neither of us knows anything about baseball."

He thought about this for a moment. Then he said, "Twenty children--many of them boys. Is it possible, maestro--is it just possible that with 20 children and many of them boys? . . . You will forgive the thought, but is it just possible that you may have played something like baseball with them sometimes? And perhaps one of those boys always being--what did he say?--struck out?"

He looked hard at the blocky features of Johann Sebastian Bach, and it seemed to him that in one corner of the grim mouth there was a touch of a smile.

Mr. Olinsky was late getting to the Clark Stadium Recreation Park in Hermosa Beach for the play-off between the Giants and the Yankees because he had spent the morning transposing the arioso from A major into C major to make it simpler for the boy. Indeed, when he got there the game was in the sixth and last inning and the score was three to nothing in favor of the Giants.

The Yankees were at bat, and it seemed that a moment of crisis had been reached.

"What's happening?" Mr. Olinsky asked a man seated next to him who was eating a hot dog in ferocious bites.

"You blind or something?" asked the man. "Bases loaded, two away and if they don't get a hitter to bring those three home, it's good-by for the Yankees. And look who's coming up to bat. That dodo!"

Mr. Olinsky looked and saw the boy walking to the plate.

Outside the studio and in his baseball uniform he looked very small. He also looked frightened, and Mr. Olinsky looked savagely at the man who had called the boy a dodo and was eating the hot dog, and he said the only American expression of contempt he had learned in all his years in the United States. "You don't know nothing from nothing," Mr. Olinsky snapped.

"That so?" said the hot-dog man. "Well, you watch. Three straight pitches and the Grasshopper will have him out. I think I'll go home. I got a pain."

But he didn't go home. He stayed there while the Grasshopper looked carefully around the bases and then, leaning forward with the ball clasped before him, glared intently at the boy. Then he pumped twice and threw the ball, and the boy swung at it and missed, and the umpire yelled, "Strike one."

"Two more like that, Grasshopper," yelled somebody. "Just two more and it's in the bag."

The boy turned around to look at the crowd and passed his tongue over his lips. He looked directly at where Mr. Olinsky was sitting, but the music teacher was sure the boy had not seen him. His face was white and his eyes glazed so that he didn't seem to be seeing anybody.

Mr. Olinsky knew that look. He had seen it often enough in the studio when the boy had made an error and knew that however much he tried he would make the same error over and over again. It was a look of pure misery--a fervent desire to get an ordeal over with.

The boy turned again, and the Grasshopper threw suddenly and savagely to third base. But the runner got back on the sack in time, and there was a sigh of relief from the crowd.

Again came the cool examination of the bases and the calculated stare at the boy at the plate. And again the pitch with the curious whip of the arm and the release of the ball one second later. Once more the boy swung and missed and the umpire called, "Strike two." There was a groan from the crowd.

"Oh-and-two the count," said the scorekeeper, but Mr. Olinsky had got up from the bench and, pushing his way between the people on the bleachers before him, he went to the backstop fence.

"You," he shouted to the umpire. "I want to talk to that boy there."

The boy heard his voice and turned and looked at him aghast. "Please, Mr. Olinsky," he said. "I can't talk to you now."

"Get away from the back fence," snapped the umpire.

"I insist on talking to that boy," said Mr. Olinsky. "It is very important. It is about Johann Sebastian Bach."

"Please go away," said the boy, and he was very close to tears. The umpire called for time-out while he got rid of this madman, and the boy went to the netting of the backstop.

"You are forgetting about the arioso!?" said Mr. Olinsky urgently. "Now you listen to me, because I know what I am talking about. You are thinking of a quarter note, and it should be five sixteenths. It is a quarter note--C sharp--held for one sixteenth more. Then strike. You are too early. It must be exactly on time."

"What the heck's he talking about?" asked the coach, who had just come up.

The boy didn't answer right away. He was looking at Mr. Olinsky as if he had realized for the first time something very important that he had been told over and over again but had not grasped previously.

"He's talking about Johann Sebastian Bach," he said to the coach. "Five sixteenth. Not a quarter note."

"Bach had 20 children," said Mr. Olinsky to the coach. "Many of them were boys. He would know about these things."

"For cripes' sakes, let's get on with the game," said the coach.

Mr. Olinsky did not go back to the bleachers. He remained behind the backstop and waited for the ceremony of the base inspection and the hard stare by the pitcher. He saw the Grasshopper pump twice, saw his hand go back behind his head, saw the curiously delayed flick of the ball, watched it speed to the boy and then he heard a sound, which afterward he thought was among the most beautiful and satisfying he had heard in all music.

It was a clean, sharp "click," sweet as birdsong.

The ball soared higher and higher into the air in a graceful parabola. It was 15 feet over the center-fielder's head, and it cleared the fence by a good 4 feet.

Then pandemonium broke loose. People were running all over the field, and the boy was chased around the bases by half his teammates, and when he got to home plate he was thumped upon the back and his hair ruffled, and in all this Mr. Olinsky caught one glimpse of the boy's face, laughing and yet with tears pouring down his cheeks. A week later the boy turned up at Mr. Olinsky's studio for his violin lesson. He looked around at all the great musicians on the wall, and they no longer seemed to be disapproving and disappointed in him.

Paganini was almost kindly. There was a suggestion of a chuckle on the noble profile of Mozart, and Beethoven no longer looked so forbidding. The boy looked at the portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach last.

He looked for a long time at the picture, and then he said two words out loud--words that brought lasting happiness to Mr. Olinsky. The words were: "Thanks, Coach."

The arioso went excellently from then on.

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