

A Poor Virtuoso Who Won the Daughter of a Rich Man by His Good Qualities, Fine Face and Figure and Wonderful Gift Story Pathetically Told That Reached the Hearts of Old Soldiers

A MASTER FOOL

BY
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"EBEN HOLDEN"

(For an incident in this tale the author is indebted to a brief account published years ago in some newspapers of one Nick Goodall, a virtuoso of wonderful power, and a history unknown even to himself, whose infirmity was like that of Nicholas Gath and who died, after much wandering, in the almshouse of Jefferson county, N. Y.)

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NICHOLAS GATH had no business going to the war. The neighbors were all of a mind in that matter. He was a frail sort of youth and the only genius in Crandallville. Besides, he was about to marry a very sweet girl, and his going interrupted a pretty romance. Even the oldest grandmothers in that rural community, where most people enjoyed a quite remarkable length of life and tongue, felt a grateful quickening of their blood at the thought of it and talked of the comely couple until they were actually red in the face.

But the cause of that is no part of this tale. To go a little beyond its latitude, Nick was the son of a poor musician with a really sublime genius for the violin. He had won the daughter of a rich man by good qualities, not the least of which, in her eye, were his fine face and figure and his wonderful gift. He had taught school winters and labored over summer in the fields and by money that came hard and went quickly had been able to get a small training in music. It set his feet in the right way, however, and at twenty he could express his wild passion admirably on the old Guarnerius that was the only thing of value his father had left him.

It was my good fortune to be passing the home of Bessie Hammerton the night before he left. I had but lately come to that neighborhood and had never met the young man, of whom every one had something good to say. Having been to prayer meeting at the red schoolhouse that summer evening, I was on my way home. In the distance I could hear the strains of the violin coming from the open window of the Hammerton house. The music halted me at the gate—an old love song that went to my heart and filled me with sadness and sweet memory. I leaned on the wall, quite alone in the darkness, and listened. I had always a mighty love of music. Now I was back again in the gardens of my youth, and the music that came to me was like water poured upon their withered flowers. The player was putting his whole heart in those tender old ballads. At the last, as I came away, I could almost hear the words, "An' for Bonnie Annie Laurie I'd lay me down an' die."

Well, the boy went off to the war the next day, with his gun on his shoulder. I did not see him until years had gone, and a singular bit of history led up to our meeting.

Separated from his command in one of the charges at Chickamauga, he was picked up inside the lines of the enemy north of Snodgrass hill. The only Union soldier in that part of the field, it was a mystery how he got there. He must have crawled aimlessly through the smoke and ruin half a mile or more from where he fell. The men who found him said he was in a pitiable condition, with his skull fractured by a piece of shell. He had lost his coat and hat and was cursing, as soldiers do when their blood is hot with the battle fever. The sight of him must have touched their hearts, for they took him up.

After a few weeks he was able to leave his bed. But he could not tell them his name or where he came from or the smallest bit of his history, and there was nothing on him that gave any clue to it. He was like a man whose mind has given all its energy to some one thing until it has neither eyes nor ears for any other and its feet are mired in the way of habit. Such a man gets a kind of mental astigmatism in which, coming to, the rays of thought focus imperfectly.

In the mind of Nicholas Gath there was a confusion of memory and perception that made a fool of him. He would sit dazed and quiet for a time and then go off in a rage of curses, the more strange as profanity had been no part of his old habit of speech. He could express only one thought—an fixed formula—repeated frequently in a low voice. It was, "I love you."

After a little he was sent back to the Union army in a trade of prisoners, and there nobody was able to place him. They gave him a free foot, hoping he would run into recognition somewhere. In a week or two he seemed to get some understanding of what was said to him and of his own perceptions. He would say that he was hungry or thirsty and express pleasure and displeasure, but his sentences were mostly unintelligible or half completed. But for the brief legend of his love he had no command of words save those that lent themselves to reckless and violent profanity.

One day a big crowd of soldiers had gathered about the band tent of an Ohio regiment in Chattanooga. They were all on tiptoes at the outer edge of the crowd, and some of them were pushing to get nearer. All stood silent, their faces lifted and lit with a common feeling. Nick Gath had got his hands on a violin and was playing with all the masterful power God had given him. It was as if his thought had found one avenue that was clear of wreckage and had come out of its ruined castle to look up at the sunlight.

He began with "Home, Sweet Home," and one of the crowd told me years after how some of the old troopers sobbed at the sound of it. There was no break or hesitancy as the tide of his emotion flooded those inlets of inspired song that for centuries have down out of the north into the great ocean of melody. The strains of "Robin Adair," "Annie Laurie," "Comin' Thro' the Rye," the "Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon," rang out upon the still air of that autumn afternoon, thrilling the homesick heart of the soldier.

The sun sank low, and the call for supper sounded, but not one of them lifted a foot until the player, handing the violin to its owner, made off, muttering curses and unmindful of any word addressed to him.

"It's the fool, and who'd have thought it?" the men whispered as they watched him walking slowly across the field, his head down, as if he were in deep thought and as I often saw him in his day of life long afterward. He was not in camp next morning, and, as I believe, only one of that company ever saw him again. There was no one to tell where he went or how he got away. He had been a problem and a mystery; now he had had a riddle in every month. Some set him down for a spy, and there were those who charged themselves at the mention of him as if he had been an evil spirit. The officers in that wing of the army were glad to be rid of his strange quest.

Ten years after the war I came to preach in a rural parish of central Ohio. Religion was regarded as a luxury those days in that neighborhood, and not many were minded to indulge in it. I was among good people in their way, but the look of mighty thoughtfulness with which they put their hands in their pockets to pay the salary was worthy of a more serious subject. With the fairs and the funerals, the marriages, the socials, the picnics, the prayer meetings, the preachings three times of a Sunday, I could not help thinking that my salary of six hundred needed a little of the relish of cheerfulness.

They were straitlaced, God-fearing people for all that, and if they lacked in cheerfulness I probably lacked in that, and my severest trial was in providing wholesome and possible entertainment to satisfy the need of it. There were some who would sing, but their singing was no help to Christian life. I was sitting in my study one day, having come to a rather unhelpful hour. We were to have an ice cream festival in the church, and I had to arrange a program of entertainment that was to recognize all the aspirant talent of the parish and be "helpful and improving." My wife had got into a temper with the cook stove, the children were looking, and I was feeling quite like a real homemaker when a member of the committee came to report.

A wonderful fiddler had come to a neighboring town, and he thought he could bring him over to play for us. I hadn't much hope of his proposal—wandering fiddlers have so little of the grace of God in them or their music—but next day I saw the man he had pictured to me and felt the magic of his power.

He stood under the big maple in the main street of our little village as I came along playing the "Marseillaise." I had heard the great hymn of liberty in Paris when the voices of thousands thrilled me with its message, but never had it come to my ear as now, laden with the pride and aspiration of a race. I have no doubt the flowering fields and the sweet air of the morning with all its orchestra of bees and birds helped the art of the player. He was then a young man of twenty-eight or twenty-nine, but his hair and beard were gray. He had a soft light in his big dark eyes, and in his playing they were full of eloquence, but when he was idle the light went out of them, and he seemed to look without seeing. I stood before him until he put away his

violin and, looking up at me, spoke the one word "hunger." There was a pitiful meaning in the brevity of his appeal.

"Come with me and eat," I said.

He made no answer, but picked up his instrument and came along with me, saying in a low tone, as if it were for his own ear, "I love you." The remark startled me, and I began then to study the peculiar conditions of his mind. He was quite six feet tall, and the dust of the road was on him, but I knew a gentleman when I see him, and he was that. A big bag was slung with a strap over his shoulder.

"Far to travel?" I inquired.

He stopped a moment, his hand upon his beard; then he stooped to pick a flower and, having crushed the petals, looked up into the sky.

"Home," he said at last, "home."

Then he took out of his pocket a letter which he gave to me. It was written by a minister of the Church of England and was dated at Lexington, Ky. It read as follows:

"To Whom It May Concern.—In the name of Christ be kind to this man. Some calamity has befallen him that made a wreck of his mind robbing it of the better part of its birthright. He is a man without a name or a friend or a home. I have written to many places about him, and accounts of his infirmity and his genius have gone far and wide, but the mystery is unsolved. I believe him to be a northern soldier, probably the unfortunate relic of some battle in the far south."

"A neighbor found him in southern Tennessee and brought him hence in the hope of controlling his genius and turning it to some account, but that was impossible. For a number of years the charity of this county and parish has supported him. He loves to wander abroad with his violin, stopping to play when and wherever the spirit moves him. I have an idea that he may recover some part of his loss if under no restraint he is permitted to go his way. So I have sent him off, praying that God will prosper and lead him to his own people and that those he meets will love him as I do for his wonderful gift. He is harmless and well disposed, and in his playing there are voices out of heaven. I beg of you, therefore, give food and shelter to this poor child of God. If he will accept them, and bear with him as a brother, remembering the promises of Holy Writ."

He lay down upon the sofa in my study and slept hour after hour until the sun was far down. Then he woke and, rubbing his hands, said, "Hunger." I read his wishes and took him to my room, where he washed and shortly came down to supper in clean linen. He ate heartily and without speaking. Then he went and sat at one of the windows, humming an old hymn tune. I had made up my mind to take him to play for us that evening at the church, and when I carried his violin and spoke to him he understood and came along without urging. He sat beside me quietly on the rostrum in the church basement. There were many about the doors who crowded in after us, and in a moment the seats were full. After prayer and a few playful remarks by a dear old deacon, whose applause of his own jokes gave them a saving humor, I introduced my master of the violin. He sat as still as a rock, his head bent forward, and never once lifted his eyes. I finished, but he made no move. I felt a little touch of fear when I brought the violin and laid it in his lap. He took the bow and felt its white bridge of hair and then dropped it on the sounding roof of his instrument.

Presently the howl lay on the strings and for a moment teetered in idle phrases, choosing its way. Then it was off like a fleet horse in "The Girl I Left Behind Me." I am a man of experience in misery and have some wit to save me in contraptions, but I was floored. I had brought the music of the devil into the house of prayer, and I was helpless, like a man in a trance. I hoped for something better to follow—something sacred and solemn enough to save us. Sister Perkins had already given me a look and walked out with a deadly swish of her gown. Before I knew it the sacred walls of the old basement were ringing in a riot of fies and reels. Storms of praise and prayer and mourning had shaken their fibers for half a century, but it was left for me to profane them with unholy music. There were those to whom it was hallowed with sacred memories of the hour of peace and conviction, of the day of mourning of the bride in her beauty, of holy vows, of imperishable hopes. The crowd was breaking, half of it was gone, and I got to my feet just as the player stopped. Deacon Harper had risen also, and I gave way to him, but the good deacon had scarcely begun saying that he hoped the people would keep their seats when the stranger, turned in his chair and an oath shot out of him that made my blood chilly.

"Horrible," "Disgusting," "Shameful!" were words that rose above the confusion of their retreat. Some of the men hung back as I came down from the rostrum, but most had women with them and were literally dragged away. To the few that waited I made a weak apology and was shortly alone with the author of my confusion. I reeled, looking down into the depths of my folly and despair. My poor minstrel tuned the strings while I stood in thoughtful silence. I put on my hat presently and went out into the cool air of the churchyard, and he came with me, bringing his violin. There among the graves he began to play. I can hear now the tremulous wailing of that silver string as it sang in the still night:

Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly.

I could see the tears shining on his face in the moonlight. I have heard men praying with a grand and primitive eloquence, when the love of God had first come to them, but here was a voice that somehow spoke for humanity. The ninth song of Mendelssohn followed, and the twenty-second, sweeter to me than all others.

Far into the night I sat on a mossy tomb, forgetful of my troubles under the spell of the player. At last, as if a thought of home had come to him, he began to play the bonnie ballads of old Scotland. Now, I have a good knowledge of music and a shrewd ear to judge it. I have heard many of the great masters of the violin, and I know the effects of tone and phrasing that are the peculiar charm of each. In earshot of any I have ever heard, I believe I could tell you his name just as I could have



A Wonderful Fiddler Had Come to a Neighboring Town.

told you the name of Phillips or of Sumner by the sound of his voice. In the ballads my quick ear had solved the mystery of the player. In a moment I had placed him, and I knew he was Nicholas Gath. It all came back to me very clearly—that night I heard him play, his going away to the war, the report that he was missing and had probably gone to a grave with the unknown dead.

"Yes," he said, nodding as he looked at me. "Yes, I love you. I go home." Then he sat down, and I heard again the voice of weeping so familiar to me in the green furrows around that little church. It was long past midnight when my wife came after us, and then we put out the lights in the church and went home together, a mighty gladness in my heart for all I had suffered.

Next day I took him to town with me and fitted him in the fashion with new clothing. He was a fine figure of a man that morning we went away together to take the train. At last he was going home, and I think some thought of it was in him. I had won his confidence, and he sat with me submissively, sometimes drumming on his box and bending to catch the murmur of the strings and with an eye for nothing but my face and the flowers.

Next day—a bright, still day in June—we came to our destination in the far north of New York; the hill country above the big timber. It was inspiration coming back to those familiar scenes of my ministry, and I had never a greater joy in me than when I came in sight of the Hammerton homestead and heard of Bessie—that she was at home and had kept her love.

"Lost her lover in the war," said a man we met, "and lives with her mother in the big house."

The having had begun, and the men were out swaying with their scythes, and the bell-like ring of the whetted steel came up from the meadows and the red blossoms of the clover shook out their perfume as they fell. My companion sat beside me looking at the familiar scene. He laid his hand upon my shoulder a moment after, saying "Home? Home?"

"Yes," I answered. "Here is home—sweet home!" He made no answer, but pointed a moment at the big white house we were nearing and then, shading his eyes, looked off to the hills.

There were a number of young ladies on the veranda of the Hammerton house. Some of them knew me and shook their handkerchiefs and came down to greet me. I saw Bessie among them before we got to the steps, and as I am a parson, I never saw a sweeter face and figure. I could not help taking her in my arms and kissing her as soon as I was out of the wagon.

"Why, Mr. Delan?" said she, looking up at me. "You are crying."

"God bless you, my girl," I answered. "This is Nicholas, come back from the war."

And then I saw her get such a hugging as a good woman loves if she is half a woman and the right man has hold of her. "Glory to God!" I remember saying. "He knows her!" And he did. "Bessie," he said, "I love you, I love you."

"My dear, dear boy," she answered. "I stayed not long then, but long enough to make sure that Nicholas Gath was coming back, if not to his old self to a man worth having, and that Bessie Hammerton, who had given so much to his memory, would give her life to him now that he was back."

His mother came that night, and he knew her also. Bessie had his old Guarnerius, and in the morning he began to play on it. As I came down the road, leaving them to their happiness, I could hear it singing the words, "I'd lay me down an' die."

How the Redoubt Was Taken

By CAPTAIN F. A. MITCHEL.

"HERE comes old Paddock," said one of half a dozen men sitting around a country store. "He's the only hero I ever knew who didn't know he was a hero. Anyway, he thinks his comrades believe he ought to have been shot for

desertion. To get his story you must make him mad. Howdy, Mr. Paddock!" And the speaker introduced the comer to his friends.

"How is it, Mr. Paddock?" he continued, "that all your comrades in the civil war got some sort of promotion, and you weren't even made a corporal? They say you came pretty near being shot for desertion."

"I can't never get rid of that mistake," said Paddock ruefully, "for that's what it was—a mistake. We was in Virginy buckin' up this long line o' fortifications at the base o' the mountains. One night I got a banker's to do some scoutin' on my own account."

"I reckoned the redoubt our brigade was tryin' to take wasn't well connected with the one next to it. I had purty sharp eyes in them days, and I thought I seen a way to git in between 'em. Stealin' alone a ravine. I managed to git by the pickets o' both armies, climbed the mountains and looked right down into the fort we was a tryin' to take. What d'ye suppose I seen? There wasn't twenty men in it, and fully half the guns was Quaker."

"I couldn't understand how our general could be weeks buckin' up agin this measly showin', but he'd wrote a lot o' books on the science o' war, and I suppose he knowed all about it. Anyway, I thought I'd go back and tell him what I'd seen. I got down to the ravine, when I was halted by a Johnny picket and taken prisoner."

"The Johnnies kep' me three days, when, seein' the discipline o' the guard mighty lax—they was all fired out fightin'—I stole away one night, climbed up the mountain an' circled around the Johnnies' left flank an' our right flank. I was walkin' into camp one mornin', thinkin' how I'd like some real United States coffee, when I met some o' our men. The officer in command arrested me for a deserter. I told him where I'd been and what I'd seen, but he didn't believe me."

"Waal, d'ye know, they court martialed me for desertion—yes, they did—an' we're, they sentenced me to be shot. The only bit o' luck I had was a raid o' the enemy's cavalry that shook us all up and interfered with my shootin'. The hubbub broke the line in our front too. I was mad. The idea o' gettin' shot for discoverin' that there wasn't no strength in the redoubt! It wasn't right nobow."

"Waal, takin' advantage o' the confusion, pickin' up a musket, I walked right up through the ravine an' the path I'd found on the mountain side till I got to the spot where I'd looked down on the Johnnies in the redoubt. There wasn't no many o' 'em as there was afore. I knowed my advantage bein' in their rear, and how I could send 'em, so I yelled at the top o' my voice:

"'Surrender!'" "I never see such a frightened lot in my life. One or two o' 'em fired at me. I fired back, an' the rest skeddaddled. It happened that a young officer on our picket line was cur'us to know what the firm' meant, thinkin' likely that the Johnnies war fightin' among themselves, an' he come cautiously, with a dozen o' the picket, up the slope. I seen him an' hollered to him to come on; the redoubt was our'n. He kem, an' it wasn't long afore the United States flag was a-flutterin' over them Quaker guns."

"Waal, I'll be gol darned!" said the officer. "We've been three weeks tryin' to take this fortification, and you've took it all alone, and our general one o' the best strategists in the army!"

"He's all right," says I. "Them Johnnies looks o' his haint 'got nobow in 'em 'bout Quaker guns. I says, 'How d'ye expect him to know what his books don't teach?'"

"I went down the scipe and met the general ridin' up with his staff. He'd seen the United States flag a-flyin' over the redoubt and didn't know what it meant. He stopped me and asked me who I was and where I'd come from. I told him I was the man that was to have been shot for desertion when the raiders come down on us and spoiled my execution. I was goin' on to tell the rest when he rode on orderin' one o' his staff to put me in arrest. The aid went back with me to the guard tent."

"Waal there I was ag'in."

The speaker was interrupted by a burst of laughter from his listeners.

"Tain't no laughin' matter. How'd I know they wasn't goin' to carry out the sentence o' the court martial? I didn't. And I don't know to this day why they didn't. After awhile my cap'n he come and tuk me out the guard tent, and he says, 'Paddock, says he, 'you jest go about yer business. The general isn't goin' to shoot ye, but yer wanderin' around without leave is prejudicial to good order and military discipline. Anyway, this yer brigade is supposed to be commanded by one o' the most scientific warriors in the army, besides bein' backed by six United States senators and twenty congressmen, and it wouldn't do for it to git out how the redoubt was taken."

"That made me madder n ever I was afore, and I said:

"'Cap'n, says I, 'you go tell the general if he wants any more redoubts taken he kin take 'em nissell. I'll never make another one so long as goddameity lives.'"