

THE LITTLE FAT FIDDLER

BY

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DOLPH was his name. By night he played second violin in the Charivari Theater. By day he carved delicate fantasies in miniature from wood or bone. These he sold at satisfactory prices, for his thick fingers held the cunning of the genuine artist. He possessed a pair of twinkling blue eyes, a sturdy and graceless figure, and an imperishable enthusiasm for all things and people of the stage. The passion of his life was "the profession." Ambition had, for him, no other meaning.

"But it iss not for me, the actor's life," he would sigh, in his careful German-English, which, in moments of excitement, was

prone to revert to ill-Anglicized German. "I have tried it all. Tragedy — and they laugh. Comedy — and they look, oh, so sad! Even the acrobatics — for I have been a performer of my Turn Verein. The tumble-tricks I could do, yes. But I am clumsy. No engagement anywhere. So I play in the orchestra. It iss next-best."

On his principle of "next-best," Dolph lived in a theatrical boarding-house, though his means and his friends called him to one of the lesser German clubs. To this house, at the opening of the holiday season, came certain members of Benny Hughes's "Gus and the Goblin" company. Then and there Dolph ceased to diffuse the romance of his nature abroad through the dramatic firma-

ment, and concentrated it upon one of the lesser lights, Maida.

Maida was the "Flying Fay" of Benny Hughes's troupe. Her first flight (via invisible wire) from the center of the Charivari balcony to the stage, in a fluff of gauze, from which she waved a starred scepter, brought Dolph's heart into his mouth. That impressionable organ never so far returned to its proper location but that each fresh sight of Maida called it up again. As for the imperious fairy, she might never have identified the second violin of the orchestra with the plump little ground-floor lodger of the boarding-house, who had once or twice greeted her in the hallways with a respectfully admiring bow, but for an after-theater incident in the Christmas week run. In some way she had missed the wardrobe woman, who was "mother" to the unattached girls of the company, and had come out alone after the performance. A little after her came Dolph. At the corner she met three young men, two of whom promptly removed silk hats and made profound obeisance.

To say that Maida was alarmed would be to do her an injustice. In many respects she was old for her nineteen years, notably in the stage woman's confident ability to take care of herself. Wisely she refrained from speech, which would have been to invite sprightly retort, and set her eyes and footsteps firmly forward.

"Don't hurry. Stop and be sociable," invited one of the men, stepping unsteadily in front of her.

Maida lifted her face and looked him in the eye.

"Why, it's the little fairy queen. This is luck!" exclaimed the second man, a little thickly. "Come and have some honey-dew and ambrosia in Rector's well-and-favorably-known elfin bower, Titania."

He lurched hospitably forward, and lurched back again as a low-set, plump shoulder interposed between the girl and himself.

"Ex-cuse me, gentlemen," said Dolph, in tones of mild remonstrance. "You make a small mistake. She iss a good girl." The little musician had a frank way of going direct to the heart of matters that was a trifle disconcerting at times.

"What the devil is it to you if she is?" demanded the bumped one. "You aren't asked to this supper party, Dutchy."

"No? Well, I don't feel bad," said the other good-naturedly. He began to edge forward a little. "May I take you home, Miss?"

The man in front looked undecided. But his companion, after a moment's hesitancy, jolted heavily into the little German, so that he was forced over against the girl. With a sudden feeling of surprise and content she felt his coat sleeve tauten with the swell of a mighty muscle underneath.

"You go on, Miss," he said hastily. "Around the corner iss a police-officer, maybe."

"Are you going to fight all three of them?" she gasped in admiring alarm.

"No, Miss. I dassen't fight." Her admiration turned suddenly to disgust. "I holt them here till you get away."

But now the third man struck in. He seemed soberer than his friends. "Oh, here; let's quit this nonsense," he protested impatiently. "Can't you fellows see you've got the wrong girl?" He pulled away Dolph's assailant. "You'll pardon him, Miss—er Titania," he apologized to the girl. "The fact is, we've all been celebrating a little. Christmas eve, you know. And as we'll all be sorry for this to-morrow, we'll take time by the forelock and assure you of our repentance now."

"As for you, you Dutch turnip," put in the belligerent; "if it wasn't for the lady I'd make a mess of you."

But the turnip was already hustling Maida around the corner. No sooner had they turned than her pent-up wrath burst out upon poor, defenseless Dolph.

"And you call yourself a man!" she began, her eyes blazing.

"Yes, Miss; off course," replied the matter-of-fact Dolph.

"Oh, if I were only—why didn't you knock them down?" she cried, stamping her foot at him.

"Why—why—why, Miss," stammered Dolph, quite paralyzed by this attack. "If you want me, I might knock down one. But three—I don't know could I do it. Besides, I dassen't fight."

"Coward!" she said.

Dolph looked at her, and suddenly she found herself a little bit sorry.

"No; it iss not that, what you think," he said slowly. "It iss not that I am afraid. It iss that I must do what iss ordered."

"Ordered? Who ordered you not to fight? Your doctor?"

"No, Miss. I don't keep a doctor. My orchestra leader."

Her laughter rang out clear and high. "Am I a man or am I a mouse?" She trilled the line from the old vaudeville song gaily. Dolph smiled responsively.

"Once I get in a fight," he said. "I break a thumb. To play second violin one must have the thumb—two thumbs. My orchestra leader was mad. He said I should get in no more fights. 'What if my whole orchestra gets in fights!' he says to me. 'With broken thumbs how shall the music be played?' So I dassen't fight."

"Well, upon my word!" cried the girl, divided between astonishment and disdain; "I've never taken any orders from anybody since I grew up."

"Ah, with you it iss different," he replied somberly. "Nobody could give an order to you. You are the kind that one must ask—must beg. But for us others who are nothing, who do the little work, there is one thing only. Die Pflichttreue. How do you call it in English? The discipline; so. To do what iss ordered; that is best. That I learn in the German army."

"You were a soldier?" Her eyebrows were lifted.

"Sure, Miss. Off course. I was born in Germany. I got a honor medal from the army."

"For being the best disciplined man?" she mocked.

"No; it iss for being the best bugler in the corps," returned Dolph proudly.

"Did you play the 'retreat' best?" asked the scornful fay.

"Now you laugh at me," said he dubiously as they turned in at the boarding-house. "Good night, Miss Maida," he continued. "I am sorry you get frightened like that. You should not go out alone. Here in Chicago it iss not safe always. Could I—should you mind—"

"I don't believe I was half as frightened as you were," she broke in. Then, with an impulse to kindness: "But you did help me. And if you like you may bring me home to-morrow after the show."

It was a radiant Dolph who sat up half the night toiling over a block of ivory, which he had extravagantly bought against the coming of a Great Idea. The Great Idea had come. It was Maida.

That week saw them much together. The other girls of the company twitted Maida on her conquest, but there was no contempt in their teasing, for the sturdy little violinist, with his pleasant face, his cheery, clumsy, kindly manners, and a certain sense of reliable character that drew people to him, was held in warm regard. Conscience began to prick Maida. Dolph's devotion, a dog-like worship that asked no return, had become too evidently serious to be a thing of amusement to her, for she was an honest-hearted girl. And the worst of it was that she was strongly drawn to him; she might even have cared for him, she thought, but for that fatal flaw at the outset of their acquaintance. For no true woman can love a man who will not fight for her as best he may.

"Discipline," mocked Maida, deriding some new feeling that struggled within her. "'To do what iss ordered, that iss best.' Very well. I order you to keep out of my mind."

On the morning before New Year's day she peeped in at the door of Dolph's studio, as he called his little front room, and saw him gazing at a tiny white figure that stood on a table. Coming in, a-tiptoe, she stopped short, struck with the beauty of the lightly-poised elfin figure.

"How lovely!" She had spoken the half-whispered tribute involuntarily.

He turned his face, and she saw that there had been tears in his eyes.

"It is you," he said simply. "I call it Geistesfluegel—Spirit-wings. Soon they will bear you away from me, those wings of the spirit. And I, I shall not be able to follow your flight. But this—I keep. Nicht wahr?"

"Oh, it can't be me!" protested the girl, a little awed. "I never was like that. Did you do it all yourself? Why haven't you ever shown me—I didn't know—Do you always do such beautiful things?" she asked confusedly.

He smiled up at her. "Nothing like this before. It iss from my heart. Nothing like this again."

"Oh, but you must!" she cried impulsively. "You will be a great sculptor, and when I am a star I will come back and pose for you. I came in to tell you that this is my birthday," she continued with gay audacity, "and you must give me something you have sculpted for a present."

"I have sculpted much." He adopted the word trustingly. "You must take what you will. I shall be honored."

When they set out for the matinee she carried a quaint little ebony figure of a blind newsdealer, he his Spirit-wings, which he would always have with him now, like a devotee.

"I'm not coming on after the first act to-day," she told him. "Mr. Hughes is going to let me go out in front as a birthday treat. Will you look for me?"

"Sure, Miss Maida. Where will you be?"

"Balcony—center. Right near where I fly from. Back to the perch." She cocked her head, bird-wise, at him. "You must look up at me, and then you'll know you have a special audience and play your best."

"Always I do that," said Dolph, smiling. "To-day I do a little better."

"Is that discipline—with a big, big D?" she asked mischievously, nodding to him as they parted.

It was a crowded house over which the Flying Fay waved her wand, as Dolph's eyes followed her down the long, slow, graceful descent that afternoon. At the close of the act he hurried behind, hoping for a sight of her, but already she was on her way to her seat, and the little musician turned with a sigh to await the orchestra call. As the curtain rose on the "Ballet of the Sprites," in the second act, he could see her from the tail of his eye, looking very trim and slight in her street clothes, and viewing the scene with critical contemplation. Suddenly his attention was diverted by a flash from behind, and something went plop! like a pop-gun, up in the flies. Several of the sprites faltered in the dance, and looked upward anxiously. There was an uneasy stir in the audience. A languid phantasm of gray, gauzy smoke floated into Dolph's line of vision, just above the top of the curtain, and hung there—a portent. Out in the house the stir became a murmur, pregnant with panic. The orchestra began to play raggedly.

"Keep on dancing!" The order came, clear and emphatic, but in low tones, from the prompt stand just inside the right first entrance. Dolph recognized the voice of Benny Hughes, and all that was loyal in him responded to the accents of cool, ready mastery. "Drop your asbestos, curtain-man. Steady your orchestra, Dillon."

"Tap—tap—tap," sounded the imperative rebuke of the big musical director's baton.

"Steady it is," said he cheerily. "Play up, you tarriers. There's no danger."

As if in mockery of the words, a red tongue was swiftly thrust down, splitting the rear scene to half its depth. Smoke began to strangle the sprites. An end dancer dropped. Out shot the parti-colored arm of a goblin, seized upon her, and dragged her behind. Another fell and rolled silently out of view. From above, a stretch of canvas writhing in flame, floated down. The terrified girls on that side huddled away from it.

"Steady! steady!" The calm, assuring accents of the star carried plainly to where Dolph sat, though still restrained so that the audience might not hear. "Keep it up. Think of your house. Don't let 'em know in front you're scared. The asbestos'll be down in a minute. Keep on dancing."

As best they might, they danced. Some of the men had stepped in to fill the gaps left by the fainting girls. The tradition of "the perfesh" was holding good. But the stage hands, bound by no loyalty to their public, had bolted. And now the orchestra began to desert, the first violin in the van. Dillon caught Dolph's eager eye.

"Can you play first?" he asked.

"Sure, sir," said Dolph, and swung spiritedly into the familiar, trivial strain, followed only by the cornet and the snare-drum. By musical standards, a very peculiar trio, but it was doing the work. It still dominated the rising voice of the crowd. Moreover, it served as a barrier of sound between them and the now frantic tones of the star, cursing the stage hands.

"Where's the hound who runs that curtain? You dogs! You cowards! You slinking beasts! Get back to your places. What! You won't? You, Hall, get my revolver. In my dressing-room. Quick! I'll teach 'em—No; too late. The aisles are jamming. See if you can get the curtain down. I've got to go out or they'll break."

In his grotesque costume, as Hob the Goblin Prince, Benny Hughes strolled out from the right lower entrance. He was chewing a toothpick. His hands were in his pockets. The paint on his face was thickly streaked with the sweat of his

agony, but his expression was that of mildly pained surprise. He began to speak in high, cool, drawling tones; the long pauses between the sentences he filled with fiercely whispered orders to his troupe.

"Ladies and Gentlemen: Don't go. At least don't hurry. I'm about to do my best little stunt. (*That right exit is bolted. Get to it, someone, quick.*) It's only a little disturbance. Nothing to spoil a good story—like the one I'm going to tell. (*Ballet dismissed. Get outside, girls. Don't stop for anything.*) A little smoke; that's all. (*For God's sake, can't you start that curtain?*) It'll soon be out. Then we'll all go out, easy and neat, without crowding, like the batter who caught his own pop-fly. (*Girls safe? Get down in front and keep 'em from breaking then.*) You see the orchestra is still earning its pay. (*Keep it up, Dillon, old man! We're holding 'em.*)

Of the musicians only Dolph and the leader were now left. A puff of smoke had choked off the cornet and scared out the drummer. Dillon stood, straight and easy, leading Dolph like a full orchestra and looking up into a fury of flame far overhead.

"Put your elbow in it, my boy," he cried exultantly. "That's the trick. The Irish and the Dutch! How can they beat us?"

The aisles were now filled with crowding women and crying children, and the murmur was rising to a clamor. A charred and blackened mass of canvas fell at the feet of Hughes. He kicked it contemptuously.

"So much for that," he remarked blithely to his audience. "All a bluff. But about the orchestra. It's a small orchestra, as you may notice, but a hard-working one. (*You little fat fiddler, if we ever get out of this, I'll give you a life job.*) And that brings me to my little story. (*It's coming now, Dillon! But we'll save most of 'em.*) A big German played bass-drum in a swell orchestra. In the middle of one of these soft, dreamy, cotton-batting passages—adagio, prestissimo, pianoforte, you know—he leaned over and looked at his score. Then he hit his big drum a big welt. (*Thank heaven, the asbestos is coming at last!*) The leader jumped him, jumped him good and hard. 'What did you do that for, you fool?' 'Ach,' says Hans, rubbing at his score again; 'he vas a fly but I played 'im.'"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" shrilled big Dillon, laughing loyally up into the face of death.

"Haw-haw-haw!" bellowed Dolph, without for an instant stopping his music, in faithful support of his leader.

Great is the reassuring power of mirth. In the jammed aisles was a swift relaxation. Some of the frightened people turned to see what the joke might be, and so, for a few seconds more, each to be counted in human lives, the impending rout was postponed. For as, yet the worst of the fire was not visible from the orchestra seats; only those of "the profession" who had stuck to their posts fully realized the imminent doom.

Dolph knew. He had seen theater fires before, and once had helped to play an audience out with panic at their heels. To his simple, honest mind, it was part of what he was paid for. He glanced up at the descending asbestos curtain, and saw that it had caught in the middle, half-way down. Hughes, still coolly talking, was tearing at the ropes with bleeding fingers. In a flash Dolph realized the situation. Maida's wire was holding the curtain. The employee whose business it was to unfasten it had forgotten or neglected his duty. His glance followed along the thin thread of metal to the balcony—and fell on Maida wrenching frantically at the fastening.

"Mein Gott!" groaned the little German, and his bow-arm fell.

Dillon whirled on him. "What!" he cried. "You're never goin' to quit, old man!" He choked on the words, and Dolph saw him fighting the fumes away from his face. "Play something German, aus der Votterlant," he gasped, his tact and wit still with him. "Keep it up till this floor is clear. I'm—all—in. The smoke——"

He toppled from his platform. The powerful little German heaved his chief down through the door that led beneath the stage, hoping that some one would find him in time. Then, catching up his instrument again, he faced about upon Maida and struck into the noble strains of the German battle song.

"*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles!*" It rose, clear and splendid, an inspiration to courage, and all that was best in the girl responded to it.

He saw her tugging with frenzied grip at the anchor. Then the wire slackened and

tore through the girl's hands. Too late, for the cheap asbestos, which had saved the theater owners a few dollars, and was now taking its toll in human agony and death, had failed to resist the flames, doubled and folded as it was. Driven by the draught, a surge of fire licked out across the open space. There arose from the galleries a great shriek of dismay and despair; the voice of the panic at last. The abomination of terror was upon the people, turning them into hideous changelings, in whom all that was human was submerged in the brute struggle for survival. It hardly needed the agonizing cries from the staircases to tell Dolph that the harvest of death had begun. He saw Maida dart up the incline and recoil from a wave of wretches who hurled themselves hopelessly upon a living, shrieking barrier. Then she turned and ran quickly around the half-circle to the right end, which the flames had not yet reached. With the swift decision of the trained gymnast she leaped, caught a dangling rope, and swung herself to the stage flooring.

Dolph's heart cried out to go to her, to help her. But something within him, something more potent than fear, than horror, than love itself, held him to his trivial role. He must stand to the immediate duty before him, like Maida; like that heavy, sodden-looking Swede chorus singer down there in front, staggering blindly among the smoking seats, with two little children that he had caught up, clasped to his breast; like a scorched and pitiful goblin who was dragging an old, yelling woman toward safety, and strangling as he toiled; like the terrified sprites who had danced till the releasing order came; like Dillon, who had fallen at his post; like Benny Hughes, now striving with voice and muscle to break the last of a jam at the side exit; like the whole of "the profession," which he had always admired and envied, which he now honored and loved.

"*Wenn es stets zu Schutz und Trutze,*" played Dolph, bending low over his violin as the clogging fumes closed down. To his dulled senses it seemed that a great seraph-voiced choir was bearing up Haydn's mighty music.

"You fiddler!" The interruption came harshly in a shout from Benny Hughes. "Get out. Run for your life! Under the stage and to the left."

The task was done. Dolph sprang toward the place where he had last seen Maida, and leaped back from a wave of fire. From beyond it came a wild call.

"Dolph! Dolph! This way. Here's a way out. Come to me. It's Maida. *Dolph!*"

He could not answer. The smoke was in his throat. A woman's arm dangled toward him from a box. His heart leaped at the God-given opportunity to redeem his pitiful part in the catastrophe by saving one life. Exerting his great strength he dragged the woman down to him, threw her across his shoulder, staggered back through red-lit smoke, and plunged beneath the stage. Foul vapors filled the air. Hither and thither he stumbled, doggedly bearing the woman. Without her he would not survive. She was the emblem of the one deed that had been given him to do. Something struck his forehead. He reeled into a yawning gulf, clutched with one hand at the little white statue of Maida in his pocket, and fell headlong with his burden.

Water trickling upon his face brought Dolph to himself. Where he lay was no smoke. Overhead he heard trampling feet and the voices of firemen. Where was the woman he had saved? Fumbling for his match-box, he struck a light and shrank in horror from the face revealed in the flare. The woman had been dead of suffocation when he found her. Feeling his way, he came upon stairs, painfully mounted them, made toward a glint of light, and fell out into a side street, where a close-packed, moaning, white-faced crowd was being held back by police-guarded ropes. A murmur of amazement greeted his appearance.

A huge, brutal-faced policeman, with eyes swollen from tears, lifted him gently to his feet. Dolph saw in front of him long ranks of the dead, lying in stiffly parallel lines. He gripped the policeman's arm with a power that made the giant wince.

"Maida?" he gasped. "Not Maida! Not there!" His glance swept the rigid files.

"Easy; easy, son." The policeman turned to a young man who held a list of names. "Got any Maida there?" he asked.

The young man swiftly scanned his roster. "Maida Corwin," he read. "Role

of the Flying Fay. Guess that's her. Safe and uninjured."

"Gott sei dank!" murmured Dolph.

"Where in Heaven's name do you come from an hour after the fire's out?" demanded the young man of him. "Who are you?"

"Me? It don't matter noddings," said Dolph wearily, all his careful English slipping from him in the stress of his shame. "Second violin, dot iss all. Just no good but to viddle, viddle, viddle."

"What!" cried the other in sharp excitement. "You're the one-man-orchestra? The fellow that stuck?" He raised his voice to a shout. "Benny Hughes! Call Benny Hughes. Tell him his little fat fiddler is here."

Down the line came striding the outrageous figure of the star, his blanket only half hiding the smirched grotesquerie underneath. A murmur of admiration that was more than cheers followed him, for already the story of his monologue had become known. He fell upon Dolph like a crazy man.

"That's the feller!" he cried. "The little fat fiddler! Are you hurt? My God! I wouldn't have lost you for—" He broke off with a gulp. "This is the man that saved the orchestra floor," he announced to the crowd. "The rest skipped. He stayed and fiddled, and kept the panic down. Dillon was down and out; I was down and out. I gave 'em the best talk I could make, but I ain't got any education, and it wasn't good enough. Everybody else was down and out. He stuck to his lines—his job—his post, I mean. Dillon's safe," he said, turning to Dolph. "And oh! that little girl that does the Flying Fay, she's crazy to see you."

"No; no. Don't let her. I couldn't stand it. Not now," protested poor Dolph, in his shame, for he had taken in nothing of the sense of what the star was saying. "She don't vant to see me."

"Don't she though!" There was a tingle in Hughes's voice. "Anybody know where Maida went?"

"The little brunette that tried to fight her way back to the stage?" gasped a breathless fireman. "She's over yonder in a doorway, crying."

"Let me through. Make way."

The crowd parted before Hughes's determined charge. Dolph sat down and held

his head between his fists. Suddenly his hands were snatched away, and warm arms pressed him close. A sobbing breath was on his lips. He opened his eyes on Maida.

"I couldn't help it, Miss Maida," he stammered. "I hat to stay und viddle—play the violin, I mean. Und all dem poor vimmens und kinder burning up! I wanted to do somedings—how bad you vill neffer know. But I am just good-for-noddings. I couldn't help it," he repeated piteously. "To do what iss ordered—that iss all I know. You call me a coward before; what could you call me now!"

"A hero," sobbed the girl. "My hero! 'Couldn't help it!' Oh, you dear idiot!"

Still Dolph failed to comprehend. Dimly he heard Hughes explaining something with his name in it to the young man with the list, who took rapid notes.

"We never could have held them but for him—never! Him and Dillon. There they stood, Dillon leading, the little fat fiddler fiddling, everyone else gone, and hell breaking loose over their heads. Then Dillon collapsed, and this little Dutchman stood to it alone. Oh, it was great! Great!"

Dolph got slowly to his feet. Many hands were stretched to aid him, but he clung to Maida. She caught at his hand. It opened helplessly, and the fragments of a little ivory statue, its whiteness stained with blood, fell to the ground.

"Oh!" cried the girl. "Are you hurt, Dolph?" and terror thrilled in her tones.

"I don't know. It don't matter. Nothing matters but you—but this. Iss it true, Maida. Could you like me, mein Maida?"

She looked at him with yearning eyes.

"I never knew how much till I left you behind, in there," she said. "Oh, if you had died and never known!"

"Come, come, children," said Hughes, with suspicious briskness. "You mustn't be standing here. The cold, you know. The smoke, you know. Pneumonia——"

"I'll take him home," said the girl.

She slipped her strong young arm around his body, for he was still weak and shaking. Together they moved forward between the lines of the dead. And the pallid crowd, a ved anew by that gleam of happiness in the blackness of the great tragedy, opened silently to let them pass.

