

The Bow of Ulysses

By PEGGY WEBLING

HIS name was Ulysses Boehm, and he made his first appearance in the good old days when shows were scarce in Sterryville, Canada, as solo violinist with the Mandrake Vaudeville Company.

Sterryville was such a small town that the only advertisements were half a dozen bills in the store windows. The hall was lighted by two hanging oil lamps, the stage being illuminated by four footlights, with pieces of tin-foil as reflectors.

Mr. Hiram Sterry, the most prosperous merchant in the town, was sitting in the middle of the front row, with his wife on his right hand and his eldest daughter on his left. Hiram was a big man with closely cropped hair and grey beard, strong featured and wrinkled; his wife was a quiet, worn little woman, and his daughter was a captivating girl of twenty, as delicate and springy as a bow of witch-hazel, accustomed to be flattered and admired, but so frank and lovable that all the girls, as well as half the boys, were devoted to her.

"Think it will be a good show, Cissy?" asked her father, giving her the programme.

"It looks promising, pa," answered Myra; "I'm very glad there's such a good crowd. It's simply packed! It might be election times."

"Thank heaven it isn't!" observed her father.

Feeling ran very high in Sterryville at election times, and Hiram Sterry belonged to the then unpopular "Grit," or Liberal party. It was a conviction among his friends that if ever a Liberal government went into office this strong, self-made man would be heard of in Ottawa. Time was to prove the truth of the prophecy.

The Mandrake Vaudeville Company opened the programme with an old-fashioned farce, in which Mandrake and his wife played the chief parts, supported by an old, broken-down actor who worked for his expenses, without salary. After the farce Mrs. Mandrake sang a lengthy song, accompanied by the remaining member of the company, Mr. Ulysses Boehm.

Ulysses was a tall, heavily-built young man, with thick brown hair, his overhanging forehead shading a pair of moody, hazel eyes, and the sulky expression of his singularly mobile mouth making him look like an injured schoolboy.

He did his best with the ancient square piano, rattling snatches of popular airs between the different items of the programme, and in the middle of the second part he played a violin solo.

"How will he ever be able to manage with that awful old piano?" said Myra Sterry.

The big, sulky boy had awakened her interest. She wondered how long it would take her to put him in a good temper. She had great experience with boys.

Ulysses Boehm played his solo without an accompaniment. He lounged awkwardly on to the stage, took up his position in the centre, and, stretching out a powerful hand, struck his keynote and tuned his fiddle. He played well, surprisingly well, with skill and feeling, and the music crept over the audience like the notes of a strange, haunting song.

Myra Sterry, young and impressionable, bent forward eagerly, forgetting herself and her surroundings, hanging on every note, and positively trembling with suppressed excitement.

"Isn't he great, pa! Wasn't it lovely?" she exclaimed, as the young violinist bowed and made his way, awkwardly as before, off the platform.

"Fine! First class!" said Hiram Sterry.

"I wish I could hear him play with that funny old-fashioned violin bow that we've got at home," said Myra.

"Your father's people brought it from the old country, so I guess he don't want to exhibit it to a pack of show folks," said Mrs. Sterry.

Myra said no more, but she thought of that old bow, again and again, during the entertainment.

On the following morning, before anyone in the house was astir, Myra rose softly, dressed, and crept downstairs. She opened her father's old English cabinet and took out the precious bow. Wrapping it carefully in paper, she slipped out of the front door, and turned her face towards the other end of the town. The hall-keeper had told her father, on the previous night, that the Mandrake Company was leaving Sterryville by an early train in the morning.

Myra had no intention of making her presence known

at the hotel. She trusted to luck—and the help of one of her many admirers—to see Ulysses by himself. Her luck did not fail her. The admirer, who was the son of the hotel proprietor and acted as booking clerk, was standing at the door and greeted Miss Sterry with pleasurable agitation.

"Has the troupe gone away yet, Teddy?" she asked.

"They're havin' breakfast now, Miss Myra," answered the booking clerk.

"Will you do me a favour, Teddy? Ask Mr. Boehm—the tall young man who plays the violin—to speak to me in the parlour. He's an old friend of father's, and I've brought a message.

When she reached the little parlour unseen, Myra Sterry was suddenly overwhelmed with self-consciousness. What was she to say to the young stranger? What would he think of her? While she was debating with herself the possibility of escape, the door opened, and Ulysses Boehm, shyly and hesitatingly, entered the room.

He was taller and older than she expected; his dark hair was brushed smoothly back, and his expression was perhaps a little more amiable than on the previous night. He gave her a quick, curious glance, and then dropped his eyes, making an awkward bow.

"I—I—wanted to see you, Mr. Boehm," said Myra, and hesitated.

"You are very kind. Can I do anything for you?" answered the young violinist.

He spoke like an Englishman, and his voice was peculiarly soft and musical. His thin shoes were trodden down, and his clothes were miserably shabby.

"I want to thank you for last night," she said, recovering her usual self-possession, "I want to send you away from our town with the knowledge that you leave a friend behind."

"You are very kind," he repeated, all his youth responding to the innocent enthusiasm of the girl. "I don't know how to thank you. I was rather discouraged—last night—I used to play well, but lately—times have been very hard—and I—"

His voice shook and he turned abruptly away.

"Poor fellow!"

The words broke from Myra's lips before she could check them. She knew, without words, that he was poor and wounded—lonely—misunderstood—and she had the courage to speak to him at this vital minute with pity and sincerity.

"You must be brave!" she said. "You are a brilliant player. I guess you've lost heart. Why don't you shift these Mandrake people? You're far too good for them."

"I must earn my bread somehow," said Ulysses hoarsely.

"I know!" said Myra, "But you're working your way towards Toronto, and you must hustle round when you get there. Don't be scared because you feel poor and don't look tony. When people hear you play they'll forget everything else."

"Do you really mean that?" said Ulysses Boehm.

"Yes, I believe in you with all my heart," said Myra simply.

He grasped the hand she had laid on his arm, and, stooping, kissed it almost roughly.

Myra gently drew away her hand, and remembered the old bow. She asked him to look at it, and he drew it through his fingers caressingly, testing it on the table, as a man tests the point of a rapier, by pressure of hand and quickness of eye.

"This is a French bow," he said, "one of Tourte's—as hard as iron and not too heavy. A perfect bow. Did you come to ask me its value?"

"No!" said Myra, smiling at her own frankness. "I came to wish you luck. I brought the bow as an excuse."

"You are a strange girl!" said Ulysses, looking at her thoughtfully under his heavy brows.

Once more he pressed the point of the bow on the table, and then gave it back to her.

"Perhaps you will return to use it some day!" said Myra.

"Will you keep it for me—Penelope?" asked the English violinist.

"My name is Myra," she said.

(Concluded in next issue.)