



FIDDLE

BY

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HERR AUGUST MULLER waved a bottle of olives in the air and talked to his compatriot behind the counter. "My dreams haf been of the Vaterland these many nights," said he. "Ach, yes! Ulrich, I will these olives take, and marmalade, and sardines, Ja. And shocolate, and podded ham that is good with butterbread. And a bineapple. There is no bleasure to-day in them, because I haf dreamed of the eadables of Shermany. And a gream cheese and sweet bisquits. So." Herr August looked round the store sadly, and sighed heavily. "There is no bleasure in bineabbles nor in podded ham, but one must exist."

"Ja, mein Herr," said the compatriot, glancing respectfully from the order book and sucking his pencil.

"Bagon!" cried Herr August suddenly. "What is breakfast without bagon? Three pounds, and I take it with me, Ulrich. I must not depart to the Art School to-morrow morning after insufficient nourishment, no. Three pounds of bagon, Ulrich."

"Ja, mein Herr," cried the compatriot, snatching up the bacon knife and running off with it.

While it was being cut, Herr August sat in deep thought upon a stool before the counter. It was a revolving stool, and he twirled himself solemnly around as he waited. Herr August felt himself lonely and an alien. "The young beoble at the Art School are fond of me," he thought; "the boys at the Grayon Glub are good boys. But I haf no one belonging to me. There is no one at home to share the bineable and the podded ham, for Maximilien eats only ganary-seed and comes not out of his cage. It is very sorrowful." Under the influence of these gloomy thoughts, Herr August twirled the faster, ceasing only when the bacon was laid in his hands. It was a large parcel, and greasy.

"Another paper, Ulrich," said he with a sigh. Ulrich placed a pile of papers on the counter and held out his hand for the parcel. But Herr August was looking at the paper. "What is that?" said he.

Ulrich spread the brown paper on the counter, respectfully awaiting the artist's pleasure. Herr August laid one fat, clever hand upon it. "Who did it?" he asked.

"A liddle boy who lifs on my third floor," said Ulrich. "He comes always in the store when I am oud, and always he sgrabbles on my wrapping-paper mit ein piece of pencil. He is a bad boy."

Herr August grunted indescribably, staring at the paper. Someone had been drawing upon it, and the result was a very spirited horse. The lines, though shaky, were placed apparently without doubt, the shading was excellent, the pose masterly.

"It has life!" said Herr Muller with emphasis. The boys of the Crayon Club could have told that they never won higher praise than that incisive "It has life!" "What is that boy's name and his age?" asked Herr Muller, still staring at the paper and breathing hard.

"Aboud ten," said the surprised Ulrich, "and his name it is Fiddle Lestrage. On the third floor—up those stairs, Herr Muller—" and the astonished compatriot was watching Herr Muller's broad back vanishing up the stairs with extraordinary rapidity.

Two nights later, Herr August went to the Crayon Club in a condition of unwonted gaiety. He whistled as he criticised the drawings, and his scathing tongue spared all alike. The Club looked at each other. "It is that I haf a new interest," said Herr Muller, noticing the look, "an interest beyond the bad drawings of foolish boys, yes. I have now a boy of my own, and his name is Fidele Lestrage. From his widowed mother and five brothers I took him, and he lifs with me and gleans the balettes and grinds the colours and washes the brushes and gifs seed to Maximilien. His name is

now Fidele Muller, and some day that name will be the name of a great artist, greater than Briton Riviere or Landseer or Rosa Bonheur, yes. I saw a drawing of his, wonterful. It had life, it lived. I took him from unworthy surroundings as what-d'you-callum took the young Giotto. Giotto drew sheep upon a flat stone. Fidele drew horses upon brown paper. Long ago when I was young, I thought mineself to be famous. Now I expect to reach fame in my bubils. I haf had many disappointments, yes. But there is something in my heart that tells me I shall have no disappointment in mine Fidele. No. I will teach him and he will be great. He is only twelf. He is a child, with a child's preferences. He likes better to draw ladies with small waists and outrageous hats than the animals he can draw so wonterful. But all that will pass. He will grow wise. Now I say good-efening. Fidele has a small gold, and I go to gif him physic. The work is good enough. But in a year or two my Fidele will put you lazy ones all to shame."

He went, leaving the club still staring. They did not know how to express their complex feelings. And in truth August Muller as a domestic character was a subject for both tears and laughter. The Club laughed; but it was very tender laughter.

With others, the Club grew accustomed in the next few weeks to Fidele Muller. Among others, it was gradually borne in upon the members of the Club that the child's character of budding artist suited him as badly as his new surname. He was poignantly French; from his eyes, clear and inexpressive as agates, to his agile feet that could dance so perfectly. He was a little creature, made for dancing, for sunshine, for all swift movements and sweet words. He visibly adored Herr August, was always visibly uneasy under his praises and pride, visibly troubled and burdened by all that was expected of him. Sometimes Muller brought him to the Club's room on those evenings when he went to criticise the week's work there, established him with exquisite pride in a corner, gave him paper and charcoal, and ever and anon crept back on tiptoe to peep over the rounded childish shoulder, expecting some masterpiece of promise and always disappointed, though never cast down over what he did not find. "He will find himself and his genius, yes," said Muller patiently. "Fidele, my liddle child, art thou not tired of drawing ladies in feathers and frills? Here is the gast of a gow. Dry that."

Fidele would look up at him, swiftly, uneasily. The light of content that had been in his face when scratching away at wonderful imaginary ladies with long hair and feathers would give place to a shadow. He would obediently look at the cast of the cow. And, presently, produce a copy of it, no better than that by any other clever child with keen eyes and skillful fingers. Or so it seemed to the keen-eyed lads of the Club. But Herr August always found some promise in the work of his Fidele. It was the first time in his life that he had not judged justly, the first time in his life he had not seen clearly, and perhaps love had blinded his keen eyes. As for the lads of the Crayon Club, they loved him, and came to love Fidele, far too well to put their doubts into words.

They called the lad Fiddle, as he had been called by his former companions of the streets. And played with him and petted him even to Muller's content, though conscious always of a reserve, a withdrawing, an uneasiness in him. "The little chap is hiding something," was the opinion of the Crayon Club. "Wonder what it is? It won't do to say anything, for old Muller's just crazy about him. It seems to me," someone was sure to add, "that his work's nothing much, if it wasn't for that horse on the brown paper. That's wonterful. He's done nothing like that since. But he's a dear little rascal." And it would be, "Herr Muller, will you let Fiddle dance for us after we've done this?" Or, "Fiddle, get up on the stand and do the fat old lady

arguing with the street-car conductor." Fiddle would always obey, with light grace and sunny gaiety. But speak of his drawing, and the laughing eyes grew anxious, the bright face grew puzzled, strained, touched with something very like fear. All the anxiety, all the fear, was evidently for Herr August. For other opinions the child cared nothing, but he watched old Muller ceaselessly with those clear, inscrutable, loving eyes. Muller felt no reserve in him, saw no lack in him, and was wholly happy in his far-reaching hopes, of which Fiddle was always the centre and the source and the ultimate crown.

Sometimes Muller would tell the child to criticise the work of the Crayon Club, listening with grave eagerness to his opinions, correcting them, changing them with a word, while the lads smiled. It seemed to them that Fiddle, murmuring his shy, childish judgments of "I don't like this," or "I think that's pretty," his eyes always uneasily on the master's face, read that face so shrewdly that he could foretell when and where approval or disapproval were due. But Muller saw nothing of this. He found great hope and comfort in these immature judgments. "That is just so, yes," he would say. "The critical faculty is developing, you will observe." Only he said "gritigal." He would go on, "Wait a liddle and you will see. It is a great gift our Fiddle has." And the Club would glance at each other uneasily, conscious of the tragedy of the master's self-deception, not daring to speak, and still somewhat held in doubt by that first astonishing horse on the brown paper. In the light of Fiddle's later efforts, there was no accounting for that horse. Yet he said he had drawn it, and he never lied, though the puzzled look and the fear always increased in his face when it was shown to anyone.

At last even Muller began to pin his faith chiefly to that horse. For Fiddle had never approached the promise of that equine on the brown paper. He struggled with his drawing, patient, afraid, uneasy, and advanced in it no more than any other clever child would have done. Some of the strain and anxiety of the little boy's eyes showed at last in old Muller's, though he was still obstinately confident. "You will see," he said. "His gift sleeps for a little while, but he will awaken it, yes. It is often so. For a liddle while the brain and the hand do not work together, no. He will regover it. Gif him time. And do not forget that horse, that wonterful horse. When I saw it, I felt like a man of science who discovers a new star, yes. My star will shine and make me famous. It is a great gift."

So it went on all through the fall. Fiddle grew sleek and plump and more radiantly cheerful than ever, except over the matter of the drawing. He seemed utterly to have forgotten his poor, hungry home, the five quarrelling brothers, the worried, heavy-handed mother. "The artistic temperament needs serenity, it needs peace, it needs sunshine, it needs room for expansion," old Muller said wisely. "That the good All-Father has allowed me to gif the child, yes. And soon my star will begin to shine brightly in this clear weather." To the Club, Muller's star appeared a very meteor, a will-o'-the-wisp dancing amont vapours, anything rather than a steady planet of genius.

"The little kid's hiding something," repeated the Club in conference. "He's growing defiant under it as well as uneasy. And old Muller's anxious. Wonder how it'll all end, you fellows?"

One evening old Muller appeared before them, a flat parcel under his arm, Fiddle holding his hand. He established Fiddle in the corner before the cast of a lion's head, and then unfolded the parcel. "It is our Fiddle's horse," said he genially, "nicely framed in brown oag. It is to hang upon the wall here." The Club solemnly murmured its thanks. "Fiddle, my child, why go you not on with the drawing of the lion?"

Fiddle looked at the lion with intense distaste, he looked at his own copy, which bore a strong