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THE KID BROTHER

by

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Alice stepped up to the long mirror in the hall, and with a smile, bowed low and threw kisses with both hands to her reflection. Then, with a serious frown and a shake of her head, she stepped back to try it once more. Again she smiled, but this time she made a little curtsy instead of a bow, and left off the kisses.

There was a sudden shout of laughter behind her. She turned around quickly to see Hal, her younger brother, who had come in silently from his afternoon paper route, to take her by surprise. He had a maddening way of slipping up on her at the most unexpected times, then teasing her mercilessly.

"Of all the funny sights, you were it, smirking and throwing kisses at yourself that way," he said laughing so hard he had to bend double.

"Go away Hal, and let me alone," Alice exclaimed in exasperation.

If there was any worse nuisance in all the world than a kid ~~brat~~ brother, she didn't know what it was. He knew as well as she about the recital of Professor Keller's music class on Friday night. It was to be at the Junior High Auditorium, and all of Forest City was invited. Professor Keller had offered a prize to the one that played the best, a ticket to hear the great pianist Reba Loring, who was playing on Saturday afternoon in Memphis, fifty miles away. More than anything, Alice wanted to win the prize and go to the concert. For weeks she had been practicing her piece, Serenade for the Doll, until she could even play those bass notes before the run, that had bothered her for so long.

Hal was still laughing, and Alice had to grin too when she glanced toward the mirror again. She must have been a funny sight, after all, in her blue jeans and loose sweater, with her hair in two pigtails,

trying to make a dainty curtsy, and throwing kisses at her reflection.

Hal threw his canvas paper bag in the hall closet, then he sprawled himself on the living room floor, where he took out the money he had collected from his paper route to count. Alice looked down at the piles of half-dollars and quarters and dimes. A boy had so many ways to earn his spending money, but all a girl could do was baby-sit. And in their neighborhood, the few people who did have children too young to leave alone, seemed never to go out except on a school night, when Alice couldn't stay up late.

"How much is it now, Silas Marner?" she asked.

It was never any fun teasing Hal, even calling him a miser. He'd only grin and tease back twice as much. He put on an act, as if he were a real miser, and with shaking hands and a gloating look in his eyes, he scooped up his money and put it in his pocket.

"Ah, Prima Donna, that's a deep, dark secret," he answered in a hushed, mysterious tone.

Alice laughed in spite of herself.

"A lot of good it does you, anyway," she said. "All you ever do is count it and put it in that piggy bank in your room."

"I'm filling it full," Hal answered. "And then I'll spend it for something super-duper special. Maybe a rifle or maybe a bike."

He went up to his room, rattling the money in his pockets, and Alice turned back to the piano to practice her piece once more.

"One and two and three and ---"

She imagined herself on the platform of the Junior High Auditorium, with row upon row of faces looking up at her from the darkened hall. There might even be strangers there, some famous person passing through. Why it just could be that Reba Loring herself would be going to Memphis by way of Forest City, and it just could be that she'd stop off to hear the recital. In Alice's dreams, anything could happen.

Reba Loring sitting there in the auditorium, unknown to everyone else, listening to Alice Brown as she played Serenade for the Doll, and exclaiming when it was over, "Who is that child? She's wonderful! A prodigy! At last I've found one who will take my place when I'm no longer able to go on."

"One and two and three and four and ---"

Here were the hard bass chords. Slowly now. Each finger in its proper place. One, two. Now for the little run, and the rest was easy. Alice closed the piano with a sigh of relief. She'd played all the way through her piece again without a single mistake. With a glance upstairs to make sure her brother was not watching, she turned again to the long mirror and bowed to a make-believe audience.

It was all so easy when she was only pretending. But when Friday night came at last, Alice forgot her dream of any possible strangers in the audience. Even the familiar faces of those she knew in Forest City, seeing them in the semi-darkness all looking toward her, were terrifying enough to her now. Her heart pounded like a drum inside her, and she had a queer feeling at the pit of her stomach. She was sure that even her new blue taffeta dress and the hair ribbon to match, were trembling as much as her knees.

Rosemary Jones was at the piano now. Oh, if she'd only play on and on so that Alice's time would never come. But all too soon her piece came to an end, and the voice of Professor Keller, sounding as if from far away, announced, "And now we'll hear Alice Brown play Serenade for the Doll, from Debussy's The Children's Corner Suite."

Alice arose and her feet took her to the piano, but she felt as if she were somewhere else looking on. Those awful bass chords! Would her fingers ever find them when she came to that part? Even in the beginning, when she played the gentle little melody, her mind swelt

so much on what was ahead, that her fingers began even then to stumble. And when she came at last to the bass chords, she found they had left her memory completely. Her thoughts raced here and there like little mice scampering, trying to recall them, but her hands were still. Frantically she glanced toward the audience, and the faces of her parents and Hal were looking up at her. She must go on. Her fingers moved toward the keyboard again. Yes, here were the notes. Slowly, ~~slowly~~, eight times she had to strike it, and now the little run. The rest was easy, and she finished it at last. But she knew, even then, that her chance for winning the prize and hearing the great Reba Loring were gone forever.

"Never mind, honey, you did just fine," her mother said when they were on their way home. "The trouble was you'd been worrying about it too much."

"Why I thought that was where there ought to be a pause in the piece," her father put in. "I'll bet there wasn't anybody in that whole auditorium, except maybe Professor Keller, that knew the difference."

Their words made ~~her~~ meant to make Alice feel better but she was thinking now of Hal. She'd given him the biggest chance yet to tease her. She waited for his words, "Well, Prima Donna, you were a 'funny wight up there,' forgetting your piece before everybody that way, and letting somebody like Rosemary Jones win the prize and get to go to the concert."

But Hal was silent. This was even worse than his teasing. He was ashamed of her. Now Alice found herself wanting him to laugh at her and make fun of her, and call her Prima Donna again. Anything was better than this. But even when they reached home, he went straight to his room with no more than a "good night."

The next morning when Alice went down to breakfast there was the sound of voices in lively conversation in the diningroom, with now

and then a chuckle of laughter from her brother or her parents. But when she opened the door, there was a sudden silence. Alice knew she was the one being talked about. Hal got up then to leave with his father, without saying anything more.

Alice ^{longed} ~~wanted~~ to call out to him. "Oh Hal," she ~~wanted~~ to say, "Did I shame you as much as all that?"

But she said nothing. She merely toyed with her food, for she had no more appetite. Her mother smiled and said things to make her feel gay, but it did no good. At last Hal came back, and shouted to her, "Hey there, Prima Donna, why don't you go wash that face of yours and get into some proper clothes?"

Alice could have hugged him for the mischief in his eyes and his teasing grin that she had once found so exasperating. But she knew she didn't dare for he hated being fussed over.

"What's come over you," she teases back. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary." "I can even see the feathers on your chin."

The mother smiled.

"I've pressed your blue taffeta and it's on your bed, ~~waiting~~ ready for you to put on," she said. "I've been wanting to tell you all morning, but you know how ^{Hal} ~~he~~ is about his secrets. Hurry and get dressed so you won't disappoint him."

It was not until they were at the bus station, boarding the bus for Memphis, that Alice realized what Hal's surprise was about.

"Reba Loring! We're going to hear Reba Loring!" she breathed. "Oh Hal, and you'd been saving your money for something super-duper special like a rifle or a bike."

"Shucks, maybe I wanted to hear some real music myself, after all that practicing I have to listen to at home," he answered.

They arrived in Memphis early and ate luncheon in a little tea room near the station. Then they walked along Main Street until they

came to the large yellow brick Auditorium. The next few hours were like an enchanted dream to Alice. Her eyes were on the curtain, as she waited breathlessly for it to rise. Hal had gone off somewhere as soon as they were shown to their seats, but he was back before she had scarcely missed him.

Reba Loring was a vision of loveliness ~~when~~ she stepped out on the stage, in a long, flowing gown of black satin with a diamond necklace her only ornament. She bowed, and her smile seemed to be meant for each one in the hall, then she walked to the piano.

Alice listened and it was as if she were alone in the whole world, and the hands moving so surely and swiftly over the keyboard, played melodies that were meant only for her. More and more she felt herself a part of the music, that when the program drew to a close, she did not want to leave. She would have lingered on and on. Hal, who had been silent until now, joined in the applause with such vigor that he made more noise than all the others put together. And Reba Loring came out again to play an encore.

I shall now

"~~I have been requested to~~ play Serenade for the Doll from Debussy's Children's Corner Suite, by special request," she said.

Alice was so startled she sat forward in her seat. There was a magic in these familiar notes that she had not known before, ~~now~~ that ~~she heard~~ Reba Loring played ~~them~~. She thought no more of counting one and two and- . If dolls could come to life, and laugh and love and play ~~make music~~, this is the music they would make. "Boom, boom, boom," the bass notes were sure and strong, and then the merry little tinkling run.

There were other encores that followed, but this is the tune that stayed with Alice, even when the curtain went down and the lights were on. Reluctantly Alice reached for her coat, and started out.

"Come on, she wants to meet you," Hal said, taking her by the hand and leading her toward the stage steps.

"Hal, whatever are you talking about?" Alice said, trying to draw back.

"In that note I left for her back there, I told her I'd take it for a sign she'd want to meet you if she would play that piece of yours."

That was where he had gone when they were first shown to their seats. He had written a note telling all about Alice and had left it for the great Reba Loring. Hal was tugging and pulling so that she could do nothing but follow. But when they were behind the curtains,, and at the door of the dressing room, he gave her a little push and started away.

"Come back, Hal," it was Alice now who tugged and pulled.

"Is this Hal? And you must be Alice."

It was Reba Loring who had come from the dressing room. She invited them in and closed the door, for there were already others beginning to crowd on the stage.

"I found this note waiting for me when I came," she said, holding up a sheet of paper with Hal's scrawling handwriting over it. "And somehow it brought back such memories of my own first recital, that I wanted to meet you. Only I was to play Limbo's Lullaby instead of the Serenade. And oh, was I frightened! I'd practiced for weeks and weeks, but do you know, when I got up to play, I didn't remember a single note. I just sat there a few minutes, then I ran off the stage crying."

She could laugh about it now as if it were very funny.

"But it was serious enough to me then," she went on. "I thought my world had come to an end. But I had a kid brother, too. And like yours, Alice, he was there, ready to help fight my battles with me. It's because of him that I went on."

She shook hands with them then, to tell them goodbye, and wish them both luck. Then she opened the door to let them out, and was soon lost in the crowds that came swarming around her, begging for autographs, or trying only for a little glimpse of her.

Alice turned to her brother and a feeling of pride came over her. With all his mischief and his freckles and tousled hair, she knew she would not have him changed one bit.

"Alice," she heard a voice call out to her.

It was Rosemary Jones, who came running up, followed by Professor Keller and his wife. They ^{invited} ~~asked~~ Alice and Hal to drive back with them to Forest City.

"Now that you've heard Reba Loring play your piece, Alice," Professor Keller said, turning to her, "do you think some day you might play it the same way?"

"I'm going to try," Alice answered.

She resolved. at that moment, to go on, as Reba Loring had done. And she knew that whatever success she might have, it would be because of her kid brother.