

## THE PASSING SHOW

WILLA CATHER

*The Pianist of Pure Reason.*

I believe Mark Hambourg went no farther west than Milwaukee, so you have not heard him. He has been the musical sensation of the hour in the east, and in Pittsburg he scored an overwhelming triumph. He came from Europe unknown and little advertised, and he has made revelations to us about the technique of the piano, about the possibilities that lie in ten human fingers. When he first stepped upon the platform of the Carnegie music hall here, a general sigh of disappointment went up from the audience. Here was a little fellow, below middle height, pink and white like a girl, slender, with a look of callow and beardless boyishness absurd in a man who was to wrestle with that old war horse of the concert stage, Rubinstein's concerto in D minor. When he left the stage, after the deed was done, he seemed a splendid young giant, a youth with gifts miraculous, a boy with the technique of a master.

But the purpose of this article is not to discuss Hambourg's playing, but to tell how a Materialist, and an Idealist and an Auditor breakfasted together. It was eleven o'clock when I arrived at the Hotel Schenley that stands in a big, windy Bellefield square out by the Carnegie music hall. Outside, the weather was doing everything disagreeable that it could, snowing and blowing and spitting fine frozen rain. The mud and slush were ankle deep and the gray fog ate into your bones. The instantaneous transition from this gray and wet and cold into the red Turkish breakfast room, where the palms grew in a soft, even heat like that of a Polynesian summer, was not disagreeable. The clang of the cars was not heard there, all those pale, anxious faces in the street were forgotten, and the long, serpentine parade of black umbrellas. The carpets were soft and red, the linen was white. Nevin and Hambourg were waiting for me, ready to order breakfast. In the breakfast room there was an air of ease and leisure, and a feeling of the deliberateness of art. It was the morning after the concert, but Hambourg looked as fresh as a school boy. His twenty-one years and his boyishness were so manifest that it was almost impossible to recognize in this the hero of last night's triumphant assault upon the piano. It seemed out of the question that the arms and hands of this young fellow were capable of such things. Meeting him casually, out in the world, one would glance at his head and figure and say that he was a student, possibly with a speculative bent. His shoulders are very broad for so slight a man, and are the seat of much of his astonishing power. They are slightly stooped, which is the mark of the student, and his head is of the kind that nature models carefully and for a purpose—large and well-developed all over, broad of brow, with a heavy mane of chestnut-brown hair that falls back over his coat collar. His eyes are brown as sloes, shaded by long, light lashes which give them a peculiarly kindly and gentle look. The rest of his face is by no means gentle; he has a big, strong masterful nose, a square jaw, and a hard, young mouth. In spite of the energy and ambition and intellectual alertness stamped upon it, one wonders where a man with a face so boyish and undisciplined by life ever got so mature and well-developed a technique. It seems almost a though he must have cheated time and got more out of twenty-one years than other people.

We sat down at the table, and the

grape fruit turned Hambourg's conversation upon India, and the strange sights one sees there and the good things one gets to eat there, and upon Australia, where he has made two concert tours.

"I always travel when I rest," he remarked. "It was India last time, next time it shall be China and Japan. O, I must get clear out of civilization to work, out of western civilization at least. I think Tennyson said something about fifty years of Europe using a man up more than a cycle of Cathay. One doesn't rush so among those older people. Time seems less fleet, what one can do less important."

One began to see that he had not found a shorter road to fame than other, he has only run faster and slept less. I fancy that energy and ambition and intellect, good brain-stuff, explain Mark Hambourg. He has a greed of labor, a passion for difficulties. His eyes glow when he talks of work, his cheeks flush as though he spoke of his sweetheart. He has been overworked most of his life. I notice it is only people who have worked very little who are always afraid of overtaxing themselves. He was ill a great deal when he was a boy, he kept up his studies in mathematics and philosophy and mastered all the more generally spoken European languages, he has played in all the principal cities of Europe, studied two years under Leschetizky, made two concert tours to Australia—remember the gentleman is twenty-one—and all the while he has been mastering his instrument, getting it in hand, battering away at the technical difficulties of the keyboard, working out that tempestuous technique of his, like young Siegfried hammering at the sword Nothung.

"Did it ever occur to you, Hambourg," said Nevin, "how little people in general really know of work? I mean the people who hurry along outside there and sit in offices eight hours a day and do what they are bid, and think they toil prodigiously. They simply know nothing about work, the real work that one must drive one's self to, where one is one's own master and one's own fate, the work that goes on in the nerve centres and that takes it out of one." He began to break the eggs into a chafing dish for a complicated omelette such as are dear to certain tribes of the North Germans, which it took forever to make, for Mr. Nevin is as dainty about his cooking as he is about his music, and his dishes are as complicated as his accompaniments.

Hambourg thrust his feet under the table and leaned back in his chair, running his fingers through his hair.

"Work?" he ejaculated, "O, that is everything, and that is everlasting, the only enduring thing on the program. One is sick or well, one is sad or happy, one is in love or one isn't in love, one is old or young, but one always works. An instrument is a rebellious spirit, a wicked genii that one must be forever subduing or be vanquished. It means eternal warfare. I have seen the time when it was a pleasure to be very ill, so ill that I could not stand or sit and must rest."

"Let me see," said Nevin, "you have been a concert soloist for nine years, and you are twenty-one. You can do things in the D minor concerto that Rubenstein himself didn't attempt when I studied it under him. Now I want to know where you have found months enough in the year and days enough in the months to have annihilated the technical difficulties of the piano in this fashion?"

Hambourg laughed and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Ah, that's my secret. That is the gist of life, the heart of success, what one can get into the twenty-four hours of a day—everything hinges on that. When I was a student I worked

fourteen hours out of every day and never more than six of them went to music. The rest were put on mathematics, philosophy and history. I'm very fond of mathematics, but fonder still of philosophy. You'll laugh at me, Nevin, but I'm going to try for my degree in philosophy next year; I think I can make it."

Nevin sat down and pushed back the chafing dish. "A degree in philosophy?" he gasped. "What for? It would be about as useful to you as an engineer's certificate would be to me."

"Well, I want to have it," replied Hambourg.

"Nonsense, boy; that's sheer vanity of the silliest kind, sillier than a girl who likes a string of sweethearts to show that she can have them. And how much poetry do you read, young man?"

"None; I don't like it, and I do like philosophy; Schopenhauer, Swedenborg, Kant, all of them." The youth rattled the glasses in his enthusiasm. Nevin looked grave, for he loves not the names of the great philosophers and agnostics and the men who kill faith. He confined his attention to the chafing dish and brought out a big narcissus-colored omelette.

I was moderately sure of Hambourg's attitude toward poetry before Mr. Nevin questioned him, but I was not sure that his answer would be so frank. He is not a temperamental player, this young Russian, and he does not pose as one. He believes in the omnipotence of the human intellect. "I like the exact physical sciences," he remarked, "where one can prove everything. I have read much philosophy, to the detriment of my religion, and I am unable to accept things on faith."

"Hang up philosophy! Unless philosophy can make a Juliet Transport a town, reverse a prince's doom,"

quoted Mr. Nevin vaguely.

A pianist of the twentieth century, this Mr. Hambourg, a pianist of the atomic theory and the Darwinian laws. Whenever there is adverse criticism upon Mr. Hambourg's work, it is to this effect; that he lacks the romantic element, that for poetry and color he has substituted speed, a whirlwind of intellectual and digital gymnastics, that he takes the piano by storm and wins at the cost of everything but success, that he merely astonishes and does not truly and deeply delight. These remarks are all very well from people with a modest little technique, and with only one pair of hands—for I am convinced that this young fellow has an extra pair concealed about him somewhere.

All these criticisms, and even harsher ones, were once made on Rosenthal, and yet no one who has heard him play the "Linden Baum" can accuse him of coldness or colorlessness. Like Mr. Hambourg, I have great faith in the human intellect, when it is united with such industry and ambition as his. Life usually softens people, as it has done Rosenthal, and is absurd to expect mature feeling in a boy of twenty-one who has been busy making for himself hands of iron strength and lightning speed. Granted that he is not a man of "temperament"—and he certainly does not pose as one—if I am not mistaken he has been intellectually apprehensive of things, and the mere experiences attendant upon living in the world will put into his playing what Mr. Philip Hale finds lacking. Certainly in his mastery of technical difficulties this young man stands absolutely alone, and it was anciently remarked "to him that hath shall be given."

The conversation ran from one thing to another, for Mr. Hambourg is interested in many things, and his mind never sleeps. He is, as I have said, an unassuming young man with an immense faculty for application and a taste

for difficulties. It will be interesting to see what life does for Mark Hambourg. I wonder whether he will remain the Pianist of Pure Reason, or whether some day those hard, white fingers of his will grow warm upon the keys they have mastered so perfectly, and the consciousness of poetry will come to him.

Some fancy like this must have been in Nevin's mind, for when the cigarettes were brought on he leaned back in his chair and looked at the boy fondly and sadly, with the glance that men who have worked and loved and suffered and sounded the whole range of life cast upon younger men who have it all before them.

"My boy," he said, "you have done so much, so much that is difficult. I know what work is, and I know how to value it. You have left most of the easy things of life until the last. I hope you will miss none of them. You are wonderful, sir, but I think you place too much value upon mere facility. I remember once in Paris Mme. Marchesi sent me a note asking me to come and hear her most gifted pupil, who has one of the most wonderful voices in the world, but little art and no message, nothing to tell with all those splendid tones. She sang and sang. When she was through Marchesi asked her daughter, Blanche, to sing. That unattractive little woman with next to no voice at all, but with her splendid art, her lyric soul, began to sing, and I felt as a traveler in arid deserts when he comes again to springs of living water and the green hills of home. Then I knew that it is art, not gift, which is divine, and that the only beauty which ever has been or ever can be is the beauty of the soul."

Hambourg sat staring at his plate, his attitude a little like Mephisto's when he heard the mass chanted in the church. As Stevenson wrote to Rudyard Kipling: "Surely all the fairy godmothers were present at this young man's christening; what will he do with their gifts?"

## Be Faithful.

Silent, in sullen discontent,  
And bitter envious mood,  
I left my work undone, and bent  
My footsteps toward the wood.

There underneath a giant tree—  
Green monument of power—  
Breathing its faint perfume for me,  
I saw a faithful flower.

Forgotten was my bitter thought,  
And discontent was gone,  
My waiting work again I sought,  
And soon the task was done.

—R. B. Morgan.

She was disappointed in love. Did he jilt her?

Oh, no. She married the man—  
Town Topics.

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