

The Chinese Dinner

Mario decided that there must be something wrong with Chester's diet if he was eating two-dollar bills. He had been feeding him all the things he liked himself, but now it occurred to him that what was good for a boy might not be right for a cricket. So he made up his mind to take the matter to an expert.

Late one afternoon, when he got off duty at the newsstand, Mario cleaned up the cricket cage, gave Chester a dusting off with a Kleenex, and took him to Chinatown to see Sai Fong. It was almost seven o'clock when he got there and the shop was closed. He peered through the window and could make out a crack of light under the door to the inner room. And he heard the choppy murmur of two voices talking together in Chinese.

Mario rapped on the glass. The voices stopped talking. He rapped again, louder. The inside door opened and Sai Fong came into the shop, squinting through the half-light. When he saw Mario, his chin dropped and he said, "Ah!—is little cricket boy." He opened the door.

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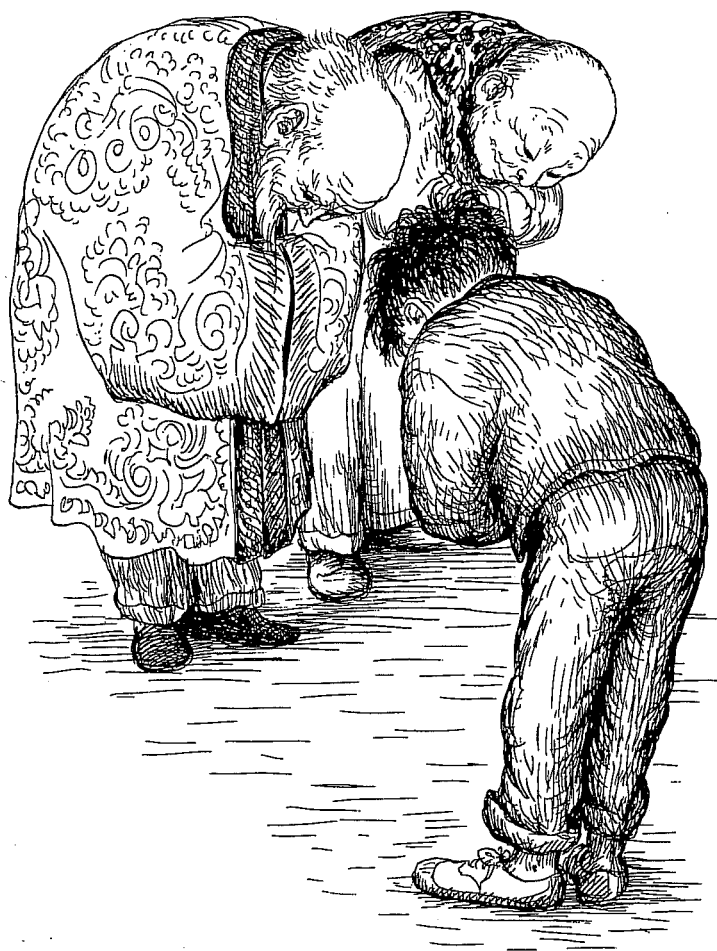
"Hello, Mr. Fong," said Mario. "I don't want to bother you, but I have a problem with my cricket."

"You come in, please," said Sai Fong, closing the door behind them. "Very old friend here—know everything about crickets."

He led Mario into the next room, which was the kitchen. On a black cast-iron stove there were half a dozen pots steaming and singing. The table was laid with beautifully painted china plates. On them were pictures of Chinese ladies and gentlemen, dressed in colored gowns and robes, walking on little bridges over a calm blue lake. Beside the places that had been set were two pairs of chopsticks, each one in its own paper wrapper.

A very old Chinese gentleman was sitting in a rocking chair next to the window. He had a thin gray beard that hung down from his chin, and was wearing a long red and gold robe that looked like the ones on the plates. When Mario came in, he stood up slowly, with his hands folded, and bowed. Mario had never had an old Chinese gentleman bow to him before and he didn't quite know what to do. But he thought he had better bow back. Then the Chinese man bowed again. And so did Mario.

They might have gone on bowing all night if Sai Fong hadn't said something in Chinese to his friend. It sounded like this: "*Che shih y hsi so ti erh tung*," and it means, "This is the boy with the cricket." Mario and Chester stole a glance at each other, but neither one of them understood Chinese.



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The old man, however, became very excited. He peered down through the bars of the cricket cage and exclaimed with delight. Then, drawing himself up to his full height, he made a very low and solemn bow. Chester bowed back and gave one of his most polite chirps. That pleased the Chinese gentleman very much. He and Sai Fong began laughing and talking together. It sounded like the cheerful clicking of hundreds of chopsticks.

When they were finished telling each other how fine a cricket Chester was, Sai Fong said to Mario, "You like Chinese food, please?"

"Yes, I do," answered Mario, "I guess." He had never had anything Chinese except chop suey, but he was awfully fond of that.

"You wait, please," said Sai Fong. He disappeared into the shop and came back in a minute with two new robes. "This for you," he said, helping Mario on with one. It was purple and lavender, and had designs of the sun, moon, and stars stitched all over it. "And this mine," said Sai Fong, putting on his own robe, which was blue and green, covered with pictures of fish and reeds and water lilies.

The old Chinese gentleman whispered something to Sai Fong, and Sai whispered an answer back in Chinese. "So sorry," he said to Mario, "no robe small enough for cricket."

"Oh, that's all right," said Mario.

"You sit, please," said Sai, and brought another chair to the table.

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Mario sat down and the Chinese gentleman sat opposite him. Sai Fong put the cricket cage in the middle of the table and then went back and forth to the stove, bringing over steaming bowls of Chinese food. Chester was very curious to see what it tasted like, since he had never even had chop suey.

"This chow yuk—Chinese vegetable," said Sai Fong, setting down the first bowl. There were all kinds of green vegetables in the chow yuk—string beans and pea pods, and also pieces of diced chicken. Next came fried rice with pork, cooked a delicious brown, with a nutty, meaty flavor. Then chow mein with pan-fried noodles and cashew nuts. But it wasn't all soupy like the chow mein Mario had seen at the Automat. He could have made a meal just out of the pan-fried noodles alone. And last there was duck cooked with pineapples. The pieces of roast duck were swimming in a luscious, sweet sauce. Finally Sai Fong brought over a big pot of something.

"You know what this is?" he asked, and lifted the lid.

Mario looked in. "Tea," he said.

"*Ha he!*" laughed Sai Fong. "You make very good Chinaman," he said, and smiled broadly at Mario.

Mario had a hard time learning to use the chopsticks. They kept slipping out of his hand. "Make believe two very long fingers," said Sai Fong.

"Two long fingers—two long fingers," Mario told himself over and over again. And then he could work them. He got so that he could almost feel the food on the end of them as he lifted it into his mouth.

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Chester was served his dinner too. Sai Fong got a tiny saucer out of the cupboard and put a dab of each course on it for the cricket. And he had never tasted anything so good! He especially liked the chow yuk, because vegetables were his favorite. Every so often he would have to stop eating and chirp for joy. Whenever he did, the Chinese gentleman and Sai Fong smiled and chattered to each other in Chinese. Mario felt the same way Chester did, but he couldn't chirp. All he could do to show how much he was enjoying everything was to answer, "Yes, please," each time Sai Fong asked him if he wanted more.

When the four of them had eaten as much of the chow yuk and chow mein and pork fried rice and duck with pineapples as they wanted, Sai Fong brought out some candied kumquats for dessert. Mario had two and several more cups of tea. Chester was so full he could only nibble on a piece of one.

"Now," said Sai Fong, when they were all finished, "what is problem with cricket?" He lit his white clay pipe and the old Chinese gentleman lit one too. They sat smoking, with the wisps of smoke curling up around their chins, looking very wise, Mario thought.

"The problem is," Mario began, "that my cricket eats money." And he told them all about the two-dollar bill. Sai Fong had to translate everything into Chinese for his friend. After each new sentence the old man would nod his head and say "Ah" or "Oh" or "Mmm" in a serious voice.

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"So I think he must not be getting the right things to eat," Mario concluded his story.

"Very excellent deduction," said Sai Fong. He began talking rapidly in Chinese. Then he stood up and said, "You wait, please," and went into the shop. In a moment he was back, carrying a big book under his arm. As the two Chinese were reading it, they would stop now and then and mutter something to each other.

Mario went around behind them. Of course he couldn't read the Chinese characters, but there were pictures in the book too. One showed a princess sitting on an ivory throne. On a stand beside her was a cricket cage just like Chester's.

All of a sudden the Chinese gentleman began to squeak with excitement. "*Yu le! Yu le!*" he said, tapping the page with the stem of his pipe.

"Here is! Here is!" Sai Fong exclaimed to Mario. "This story of princess of ancient China. Had cricket for pet and feed him mulberry leaves. It say, 'Just as silkworm who eat of mulberry tree spin beautiful silk, so cricket who eat leaves spin beautiful song.'"

"Then we've got to find a mulberry tree," said Mario. The only one he knew of right off hand was in the Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn, and that had a fence around it.

"But I have tree!" said Sai Fong, and his face curled up in a smile as wide as a Halloween pumpkin's. "Right outside window." He went to the window and pulled up the shade. In the courtyard outside a mulberry tree

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was growing. One of its branches almost stuck into the kitchen. Sai pulled off about a dozen leaves and put one in the cricket cage. But Chester didn't touch it.

Mario was dismayed. "He doesn't like it," he said.

"Oh, he like!" said Sai Fong. "He just full of Chinese dinner now!"

And that was exactly the truth. Any other time Chester would have been gobbling up the leaf. But he was stuffed now. Just to show them that leaves were what he wanted, however, he managed to take one bite.

"You see?" said Sai Fong. "He eat leaf when he hungry."

Chester was feeling so contented that he had to sing for a while. Everyone listened very quietly. The only other sound was the creaking of the rocking chair, which went very well with the cricket's song. Sai Fong and his friend were very touched by the concert. They sat with their eyes closed and expressions of complete peace on their faces. When it was over, the old Chinese gentleman blew his nose on a silk handkerchief he took out of his sleeve. His eyes were moist. Dabbing at them with the handkerchief, he whispered something to Sai Fong.

"He say it like being in palace garden to hear cricket sing," Sai Fong translated to Mario.

The boy thanked Sai Fong for the Chinese dinner, but said he would have to be going now, because it was late.

"You come back any time," said Sai Fong. He put the

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eleven mulberry leaves in a little box and gave it to Mario. "Plenty leaves on tree. I save all for cricket."

Mario thanked him again. The old Chinese gentleman stood up and bowed. Mario bowed to him. Sai Fong bowed, and Mario bowed to him too. In the cage Chester was bowing to everybody. Mario backed toward the door, still bowing, and went out. It had been a very nice evening. He felt formal and polite from all the bowing, and he was glad that his cricket had been able to make the two Chinese gentlemen so happy.

The Dinner Party

Late one night Chester Cricket was very busy inside the newsstand. As soon as the Bellinis went home, he hopped out of the matchbox and began to clean up. First he pushed in the box so its sides were even and then slid it over beside the alarm clock. Next he pulled a piece of Kleenex out of the Kleenex box and dragged it back and forth across the shelf. When the shelf was dusted, he picked up the tissue in his two front legs and polished the cricket cage so its bars shone. He wiped off the glass in the front of the alarm clock and the radio too until he could see his own reflection. The dial of the clock was luminous and it shed a very soft green light. Chester wanted everything to be perfect on this particular evening. There was going to be a party.

It was exactly two months since Chester had arrived in New York, and the three animals wanted to celebrate the anniversary. Nothing too formal, you understand—just a little dinner for everyone. Tucker Mouse had volunteered to let them use the drain pipe, but Chester didn't want to eat amid all the waste paper and rubbish his friend had collected. So after many conferences,

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they resolved on the newsstand. It was sheltered, and quite big enough, and the radio could provide nice background music.

Tucker Mouse jumped up beside Chester. "How is the food coming, Tucker?" asked the cricket. Tucker had been put in charge of refreshments.

"Hic hic hic," laughed Tucker Mouse, rubbing his front feet together, "wait till I tell you." He lifted up one foot. "I have: two chunks liverwurst, one slice ham, three pieces bacon—from a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich—some lettuce and tomato—from said sandwich—whole-wheat, rye, and white crusts, a big gob cole slaw, two squares from a Hershey chocolate bar, the end of an Oh! Henry candy bar—*with* nuts!—and now comes the climax." Tucker paused. "*Iced* soft drinks!"

"How did you get the ice?" asked Chester.

"Wait, I'll tell you," said Tucker. "All day I've been hiding by the lunch counter. When the soda jerks made a Coke I grabbed the ice they spilled, which I then took to the drain pipe. There," he went on with especial pride, "it happens I have a heatproof, insulated bag saved up for just such an occasion. I put in the ice, shut up the opening—we have ice! Nice, eh?"

He sat back on his haunches and grinned at Chester.

"Very nice," said Chester. "Where have you got the drinks?"

"In paper cups," said Tucker. "And no mixing of drinks either. For each kind of soft drink—another cup."

"That's wonderful," said the cricket with admiration.

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"Oh, it's nothing really," said Tucker, waving a foot. "I mean, it's something—but nothing too much." He looked around at the shelf and clock and everything. "You are to be congratulated on the cleanliness. Of course, it isn't as important as food-getting, but to be clean is very nice too."

While they were talking, Harry Cat came in through the opening at the side of the newsstand. Chester hopped down, like a good host, to greet his new guest.

"How was the concert?" he asked. Harry had been down to Washington Square to hear an open-air concert of chamber music. How you could play chamber music outdoors Chester didn't understand—but it was New York and anything could happen.

"Very good," answered Harry. "But I don't think the violinist played nearly as well as you do."

It made Chester very happy to hear that, but he had to turn away so Harry wouldn't see him blush.

"Harry, help me with the food," said Tucker. He jumped down to the floor and scurried over to the drain pipe.

The mouse and the cat put all the different courses over to one side with the soft drinks so everyone could just go up and help himself. It was buffet style. Tucker and Chester sat on the shelf and Harry, who was taller, sat on the stool. But his head was on a level with theirs.

Tucker Mouse took great pride in cooling the soft drinks. There were four cups, one with Coca-Cola, one with Pepsi, one root beer, and the last orange pop. Tucker put a big piece of ice in each and then made a

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show of stirring them up with a straw he had found that afternoon.

"Ah," he sighed. "Where but in New York could a mouse have ice in his Coca-Cola?"

"We should have music," said Harry. He reached over and flicked on the radio.

First they got a news report. But that wouldn't do for a party. Harry twisted the dial and went through a quiz show, an amateur hour, and a play about the Deep South before he got what he wanted. Music is very nice for a party because it gives you time to eat your fill without having to make conversation.

Harry Cat was working on his second piece of Oh! Henry candy bar when he suddenly stopped munching and listened to the tune the radio was playing. His head began to sway from side to side.

"That's my favorite song," he said, beginning to hum along with it.

"Sing it, Harry," said Chester Cricket.

"You don't know what you're letting yourself in for," blurted out Tucker Mouse through a mouthful of bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich.

But Harry was in a party mood, so he cleared his throat and began:

"When I'm calling youuuuuuuuu

Oooo-oooo-oooo

Oooo-oooo-oooo—"

Harry had a delightful yowl that went very well with the lyrics of the song.

"You see what I told you?" groaned Tucker.

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Harry went right on, however:

"Will you answer truuuuuuu

Oooo-oooo-oooo

Oooo-oooo-oooo?"

"Maybe we should turn back to the amateur hour," said Tucker Mouse, helping himself to the Hershey bar.

"I think Harry sings beautifully," said Chester.

"You sing now, Chester," said Harry Cat.

Secretly the cricket was very anxious to perform for them, but he had to have some encouragement first. He limbered his wings and said, "It's not really singing, you know—"

"Singing, playing—who cares, as long as it doesn't sound like Harry," said Tucker Mouse. He slurped up the last of the orange soda and they all fell silent.

It was well along in August by now, and just the time of the year that crickets all over the world like most. Chester hadn't done nearly as much chirping as usual this summer because he was living in New York, but tonight he played to his heart's content. He thought of his meadow and the stump, the brook and the old willow tree. The song swelled up from his wings and filled the newsstand.

When it was over, Tucker and Harry applauded and congratulated Chester. "Now play us something we know," suggested Harry Cat.

"Well, I don't know if I can," said Chester. "All my songs are my own compositions."

"Listen to the radio and play what it does," said Harry. He turned up the music.



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Chester cocked his head to one side. The radio was playing the "Blue Danube" waltz. When he had heard enough to memorize the melody, Chester joined in. And he played it perfectly! The cricket was such a natural musician that he not only chirped the tune—in a few minutes he was making up variations and spinning them out without ever losing the rhythm of the waltz. He found that by tilting his wings he could make the notes go higher or lower, just as he wanted.

Chester got an ovation from his friends. Harry Cat, who had crept into the Metropolitan Opera House a few times and knew how people acted there, shouted, "Bravo, Chester! Bravo!" Of course after such a sample of his talent for imitating songs, his friends insisted that he keep on. And Chester was happy to oblige. There's nothing like a good audience to encourage a performer.

The next selection from the radio was a group of Italian folk songs. Chester picked out the different melodies and chirped them along with the orchestra. After the folk songs came a group of operatic arias. It was easier for Chester to play the ones written for tenors than the ones for sopranos, contraltos, and basses, but he did them all beautifully.

Each time he stopped after singing a new piece, the animals shouted, "More! More! More!" So Chester went right on. Now came a South American rumba. The rhythm was very tricky and it took the cricket a few minutes to catch on to it, but once he had it, he never

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lost the beat. Chirping away, he sounded like a pair of lively castanets.

"Imagine!" exclaimed Tucker Mouse, "he plays pop as well as classical."

Tucker was feeling very lively himself because of all the soda water he had swallowed. The South American tempo began to excite him. He jumped up and started to dance around the shelf.

Harry Cat burst out laughing, but that didn't bother Tucker. He was a carefree soul. "Chester can play—I can dance," he panted. "We should go into vaudeville."

"If you danced as well as he played, you could," said Harry.

"So I'm just learning," said Tucker, and threw himself into a wild twirl next to Papa Bellini's pipe.

He couldn't see where he was going and he toppled over into the box of kitchen matches. The box flipped over. A shower of matches fell around the shelf and onto the cement floor. There were several yellow bursts and the sharp scratch that a match makes when it's lit. Most of them fell far enough away from the wooden walls so they could burn themselves out without danger. But one match, unluckily, struck right next to a pile of that morning's newspapers. The spurt of flames it sent up lit the frayed edge of the papers and quickly spread over the whole bundle.

"Watch out!" shouted Chester. Harry Cat leaped up to the shelf just in time to keep his tail from being burned. The cricket was the first to realize what had

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happened—and what was likely to happen if they didn't put the fire out. "Get the Coca-Cola," he said. "Pour it over."

"I drank it all," shouted Tucker.

"You would!" said Chester. "Is there any ice?"

Harry and Tucker dumped what was left in the insulated bag down on the flames. But it wasn't enough. The fire sputtered, died down, and then flared up again, larger than ever.

"Maybe we can smother it," said Harry.

There was a pile of magazines on the very edge of the shelf, just above the fire. Harry strained and pushed and succeeded in toppling them over. They all peered over the edge to see if the fire was out.

"Oh fine!" said Tucker. "She's still burning and you blocked the hole to get out!"

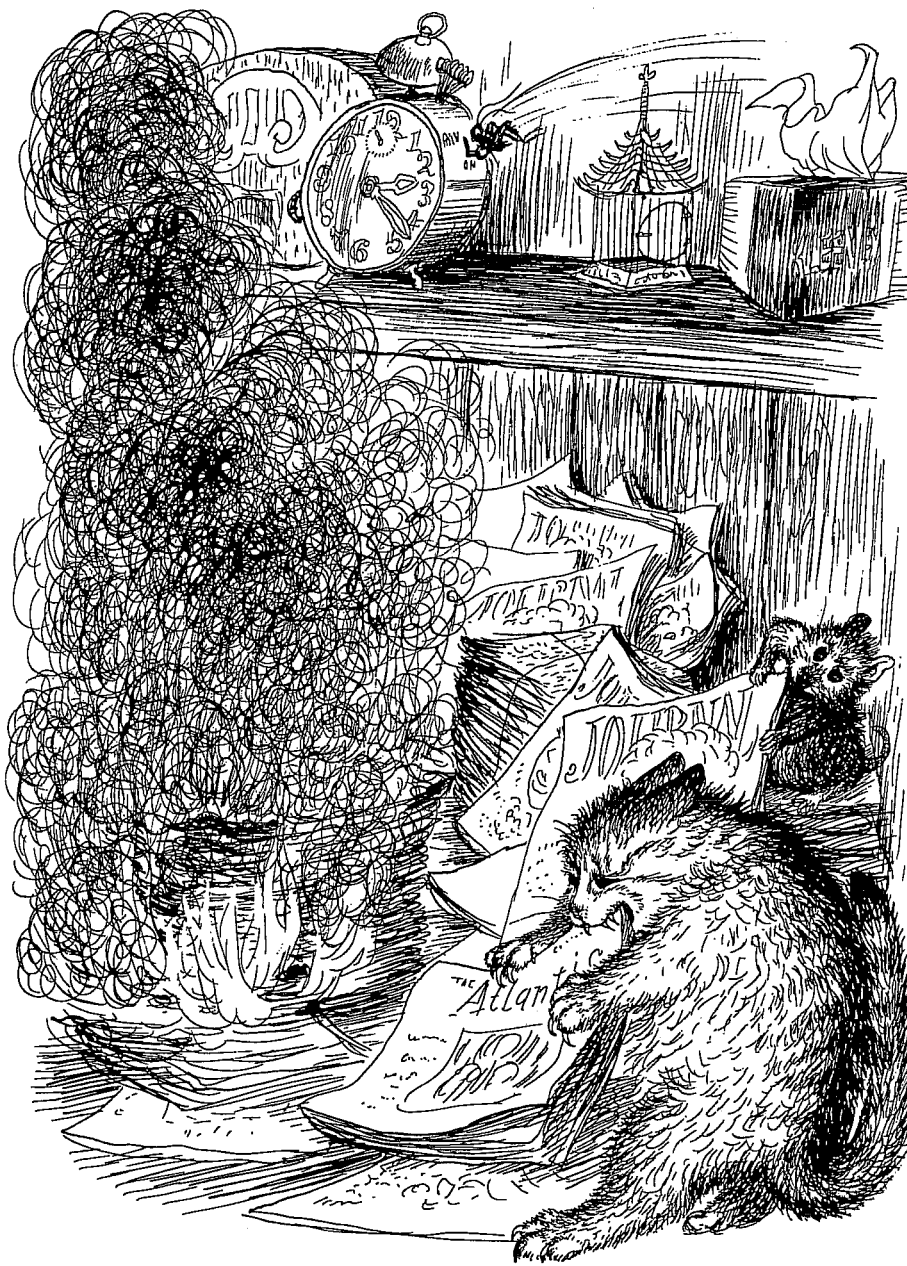
They were trapped. Harry and Tucker jumped down and started pulling away the magazines furiously. But the fire crept closer and they had to back away.

"What a way to go," said Tucker. "I should have stayed on Tenth Avenue."

For a moment Chester got panicky. But he forced his thoughts back into order and took stock of the situation. And an idea struck him. In one leap he jumped onto the alarm clock, landing right on the button that set off the alarm. The old clock began ringing so wildly it shook itself around the shelf in a mad dance. Chester hopped back to his friends.

"Any alarm in a fire," he said.

They waited, crouched against the wall. On the op-



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posite side of the stand the flames were lapping against the wood. Already the paint on it had begun to blister.

Chester could hear voices outside the newsstand. Even at this hour there were always a few people in the station. Somebody said, "What's that?"

"I smell smoke," said another. Chester recognized the voice. It was Paul, the conductor on the shuttle. There was a sound of footsteps running away, then running back again, and a hammering began. The newsstand shook all over.

"Somebody get the other side," said Paul.

The cover was wrenched off. Clouds of smoke billowed up. The people standing around were astonished to see, through the fumes and glare of the fire, a cat, a mouse, and a cricket, running, jumping, to safety.

ELEVEN

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From the drain pipe the animals watched Paul put out the fire. He dragged what papers he could out of the newsstand and got a bucket of water to douse the rest. And he watered down the walls to make sure they wouldn't flare up later. When the danger was over, he called up Papa Bellini on the telephone.

"What a mess," said Tucker Mouse, looking at the soggy, smoldering piles of papers and magazines.

No one knew what to say.

"What are you going to do, Chester?" said Harry Cat finally.

"I'm going back there," said Chester. "If the Bellinis find me gone, they'll think I set the fire and ran."

"What makes you think they won't think you set the fire and stayed?" said Tucker.

"I'll have to take that chance," said Chester. Before the cat or the mouse could say anything to stop him, he hopped over to the newsstand.

Paul had told the engineer that he would miss a few trips on the shuttle and was waiting for the Bellinis. He

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didn't want anyone monkeying with the cash register while the cover was off. The conductor thought that the cups and bags from the animals' party had been left by Mario or Papa. While he was taking them over to a trash barrel, Chester jumped up on the shelf. Nothing there had been burned, but there was a smoky smell to everything. The cricket took a downhearted leap into the cage and settled himself for whatever might come.

It didn't take the Bellinis long to arrive. They had taken a taxi. And when the Bellinis took a taxi, you could be sure it was an emergency. Chester could hear them hurrying down the steps from the street. Papa was trying to soothe Mama, who was wheezing heavily from asthma and excitement. When she saw the heaps of scorched magazines and newspapers, she began to moan and shake her head. Papa eased her down onto the stool, but it was still covered with water and she stood up again with a wet spot on her skirt.

"Ruin—we're ruined," she sobbed. "Everything's burned."

Papa comforted her as best he could by saying that it was only a few stacks of the *Ladies' Home Journal* that had been lost. But Mama wouldn't believe that anything less than complete destruction had come to them all.

Mario, who brought up the rear of this sad parade, thought first for the safety of his cricket. He saw that Chester was in his cage, though, and decided that it would be best to keep quiet until Mama's outburst of grief had subsided.

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Paul told them what had happened: how he smelled smoke and heard the alarm clock ringing. Then he came to the part about the animals who had escaped from the burning newsstand.

"So—!" said Mama Bellini, all her despair changing into anger. "Animals in the newsstand again! Didn't I tell you?" She lifted her forefinger at Mario. "Didn't I say the cricketer would ask in his pals? He probably set the fire. He's a firebug!"

Mario didn't have a chance to speak. He would open his mouth to defend Chester, but before he could say a thing, the words were drowned in Mama's flood of reproaches. She had found someone on whom she could blame her unhappiness and there was no stopping her.

When a pause came, Mario said meekly, "My cricket would never do anything like burn up our newsstand."

"The fact remains," said Mama, "we had a fire!"

"But crickets are good luck—" Mario began.

"Good luck!" said Mama indignantly. "He eats money—he commits arson! He's a jinx, that's what. He's good luck going backwards. And he's got to go." She folded her arms across her chest. It was an attitude that Mario knew meant the absolute end of everything.

"I could keep him somewhere else," the boy offered.

"No," said Mama, shaking her head as firmly as a door being closed. "He's a jinx. He goes."

Papa put his finger to his lips as a signal that Mario shouldn't say anything more and the two of them began to clean up. They carted away all the hopelessly burned

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magazines and tried to salvage some that had only been scorched. Mario mopped the floor of the newsstand while Mama spread out papers to dry. By the time they were finished, it was almost the hour for the first wave of commuters.

Chester was lying on the floor of the cricket cage. He felt guilty, because even if he hadn't set it, in a way the fire was his fault. If he hadn't invited everyone into the newsstand, it wouldn't have happened. And it was his playing of the rumba that had made Tucker want to dance, and so tip over the matches. And he did eat the two-dollar bill. He began to believe that he really was a jinx.

During the early-morning rush hour Mario was especially eager in his shouts of "Paper, mister," and "*Time or Life*, mister." Papa was more active than usual too. But Mama sat glumly on the stool with a gray, determined look on her face. Despite the fact that the selling that morning went very well, she wouldn't change her mind. After the rush was over, Papa went out to buy a new lock.

Chester heard a soft scratching from behind the Kleenex box. A familiar face peeked out. "What's going on?" whispered Tucker Mouse.

"Are you crazy?" said Chester under his breath. "All they need is to catch you here."

"I had to find out how you were doing," said Tucker.

"They're going to throw me out," sighed Chester.

"Oh oh oh," Tucker moaned. "And it was me that

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did it. Supposing I give you the rest of my life's savings. Maybe we could buy them off."

Chester leaned his black little head up against the bars of the cricket cage. "Not this time," he said. "Mama's got her mind made up. I don't blame her either. I wish I'd never come to New York."

"Oh, Chester," wailed Tucker Mouse, "don't say that! You'll make me feel like a rat. And I'm only a mouse."

"It's not your fault, Tucker," said Chester. "But I've been nothing but bad luck to them since I came."

Without knowing what he was doing, the cricket began to chirp to ease his feelings. He found that it helped somehow if you sang your sadness. He wasn't paying much attention and just by accident he played the first few notes of an Italian folksong he had heard the night before. It was so melancholy, and yet so sweet, that it fitted his mood exactly.

Mama Bellini was untying a bundle of *Herald Tribunes* when she heard the chirping. At first she didn't know what it was. "*Che cos' e questa?*" she said in Italian, which means, "What's that?"

Chester stopped playing.

"*Chi cantava?*" said Mama. "Who was singing?"

Mario looked at his mother. Usually when she spoke in Italian it meant that she was in a good mood. But that couldn't be true today.

Now Tucker Mouse was a very good judge of character—both animal and human. He thought he heard

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a kind of softness in Mama Bellini's voice. "Play some more," he whispered to Chester.

"She hates me," said Chester. "It'll only make her more angry."

"Do as I tell you!" commanded the mouse urgently.

So Chester started to chirp again. He was in such disgrace anyway, what difference could it make? The piece he was playing was called "Come Back to Sorrento," and by the greatest good luck, it happened to be Mama Bellini's favorite song. Back in Naples, Italy, when Papa was courting her before they came to America, he used to come beneath her window on a moonlit night and sing this ballad to the plunking of an old guitar. As the cricket chirped, the whole scene came back to Mama: the still, warm night, the moon shining down on the velvety Bay of Naples, and Papa singing to her. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought of the bygone times, and very softly she began to murmur the words to the song.

Chester Cricket had never played with so much skill before. When he heard Mama singing, he slowed his tempo so she could keep up without straining. When she was loud, he was too—and then softer when she got choked up with emotion and her voice dwindled. But always his chirping carried her along, keeping her on the right beat and the right tune. He was the perfect accompanist.

Mario was dumbfounded. He stared astonished at the cricket cage and then at his mother. It was just as



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marvelous for his mother to be singing as it was for a cricket to chirp familiar songs. Sometimes, when she was very happy, Mama Bellini whistled, and once or twice Mario had heard her hum. But now here she was crying and warbling like an Italian nightingale!

Chester finished "Come Back to Sorrento."

"Keep it up! Keep it up!" squeaked Tucker Mouse. "She's a sucker for sad songs."

Before Mama's mood had a chance to wear off, Chester began chirping the selections from opera that he had played during the party. Mama didn't know the words to the operas, but she hummed some of the tunes along with him. Mario was as still as stone.

Papa Bellini came back from the locksmith's. Coming down the stairs he was surprised not to hear his wife and Mario calling out the newspapers. But when he got nearer the newsstand, he was even more surprised to hear the strains of the Grand March from *Aida* coming from the cricket cage.

"He chirps *opera*?!" exclaimed Papa. His eyes looked as big and startled as two hard-boiled eggs.

"Shhh," said Mama with a wave of her hand.

Chester's memory for music was perfect. He had to hear a piece only once to remember it forever. When he had finished all the operatic numbers, he stopped. "Should I go on with the pop tunes?" he whispered to Tucker Mouse, who was still hidden behind the Kleenex box.

"Wait a while," said Tucker. "See what happens."

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Mama Bellini had a dreamy look in her eyes. She put her arm around her son and said, "Mario, no cricketer who sings '*Torna a Surrento*' so beautifully could possibly start a fire. He can stay a while longer."

Mario threw his arms around his mother's neck.

"You hear? You hear?" squealed Tucker Mouse. "You can stay! Oh boy oh boy oh boy! And this is only the beginning. I'll be your manager—okay?"

"Okay," said Chester.

And so began the most remarkable week in Chester Cricket's—or any cricket's—life.

TWELVE

Mr. Smedley

It was two o'clock in the morning. Chester Cricket's new manager, Tucker Mouse, was pacing up and down in front of the cricket cage. Harry Cat was lying on the shelf with his tail drooping over the edge, and Chester himself was relaxing in the matchbox.

"I have been giving the new situation my serious consideration," said Tucker Mouse solemnly. "As a matter of fact, I couldn't think of anything else all day. The first thing to understand is: Chester Cricket is a very talented person."

"Hear! hear!" said Harry. Chester smiled at him. He was really an awfully nice person, Harry Cat was.

"The second thing is: talent is something rare and beautiful and precious, and it must not be allowed to go to waste." Tucker cleared his throat. "And the third thing is: there might be—who could tell?—a little money in it, maybe."

"I knew that was at the bottom of it," said Harry.

"Now wait, please, Harry, please, just listen a minute before you begin calling me a greedy rodent," said Tucker. He sat down beside Chester and Harry.

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"The newsstand is doing lousy business—right? *Right!* If the Bellinis were happy, Mama Bellini wouldn't be always wanting to get rid of him—right? *Right!* She likes him today because he played her favorite songs, but who can tell how she might like him tomorrow?"

"And also I'd like to help them because they've been so good to me," put in Chester Cricket.

"But naturally!" said Tucker. "And if a little bit of the rewards of success should find its way into a drain pipe where lives an old and trusted friend of Chester—well, who is the worse for that?"

"I still don't see how we can make any money," said Chester.

"I haven't worked out the details," said Tucker. "But this I can tell you: New York is a place where the people are willing to pay for talent. So what's clear is, Chester has got to learn more music. I personally prefer his own compositions—no offense, Chester."

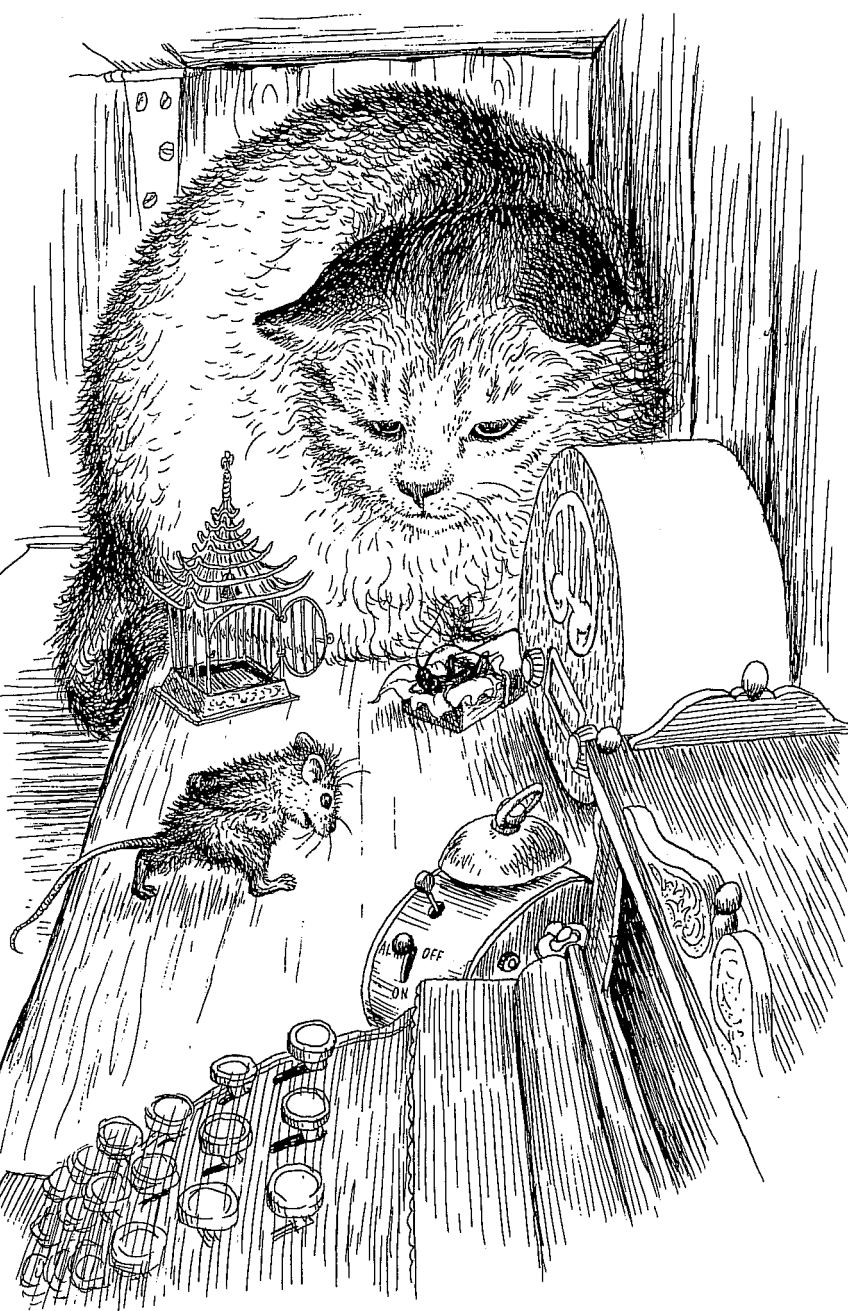
"Oh no," said the cricket. "I do myself."

"But the human beings," Tucker went on, "being what human beings are—and who can blame them?—would rather hear pieces written by themselves."

"But how am I going to learn new songs?" asked Chester.

"Easy as pie," said Tucker Mouse. He darted over to the radio, leaned all his weight on one of the dials, and snapped it on.

"Not too loud," said Harry Cat. "The people outside will get suspicious."



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Tucker twisted the dial until a steady, soft stream of music was coming out. "Just play it by ear," he said to Chester.

That was the beginning of Chester's formal musical education. On the night of the party he had just been playing for fun, but now he seriously set out to learn some human music. Before the night was over he had memorized three movements from different symphonies, half a dozen songs from musical comedies, the solo part for a violin concerto, and four hymns—which he picked up from a late religious service.

The next morning, which was the last Sunday in August, all three Bellinis came to open the newsstand. They could hardly believe what had happened yesterday and were anxious to see if Chester would continue to sing familiar songs. Mario gave the cricket his usual breakfast of mulberry leaves and water, which Chester took his time eating. He could see that everyone was very nervous and he sort of enjoyed making them wait. When breakfast was over, he had a good stretch and limbered his wings.

Since it was Sunday, Chester thought it would be nice to start with a hymn, so he chose to open his concert with "Rock of Ages." At the sound of the first notes, the faces of Mama and Papa and Mario broke into smiles. They looked at each other and their eyes told how happy they were, but they didn't dare to speak a word.

The Cricket in Times Square

During the pause after Chester had finished "Rock of Ages," Mr. Smedley came up to the newsstand to buy his monthly copy of *Musical America*. His umbrella, neatly folded, was hanging over his arm as usual.

"Hey, Mr. Smedley—my cricket plays hymns!" Mario blurted out even before the music teacher had a chance to say good morning.

"And opera!" said Papa.

"And Italian songs!" said Mama.

"Well, well, well," said Mr. Smedley, who didn't believe a word, of course. "I see we've all become very fond of our cricket. But aren't we letting our imagination run away with us a bit?"

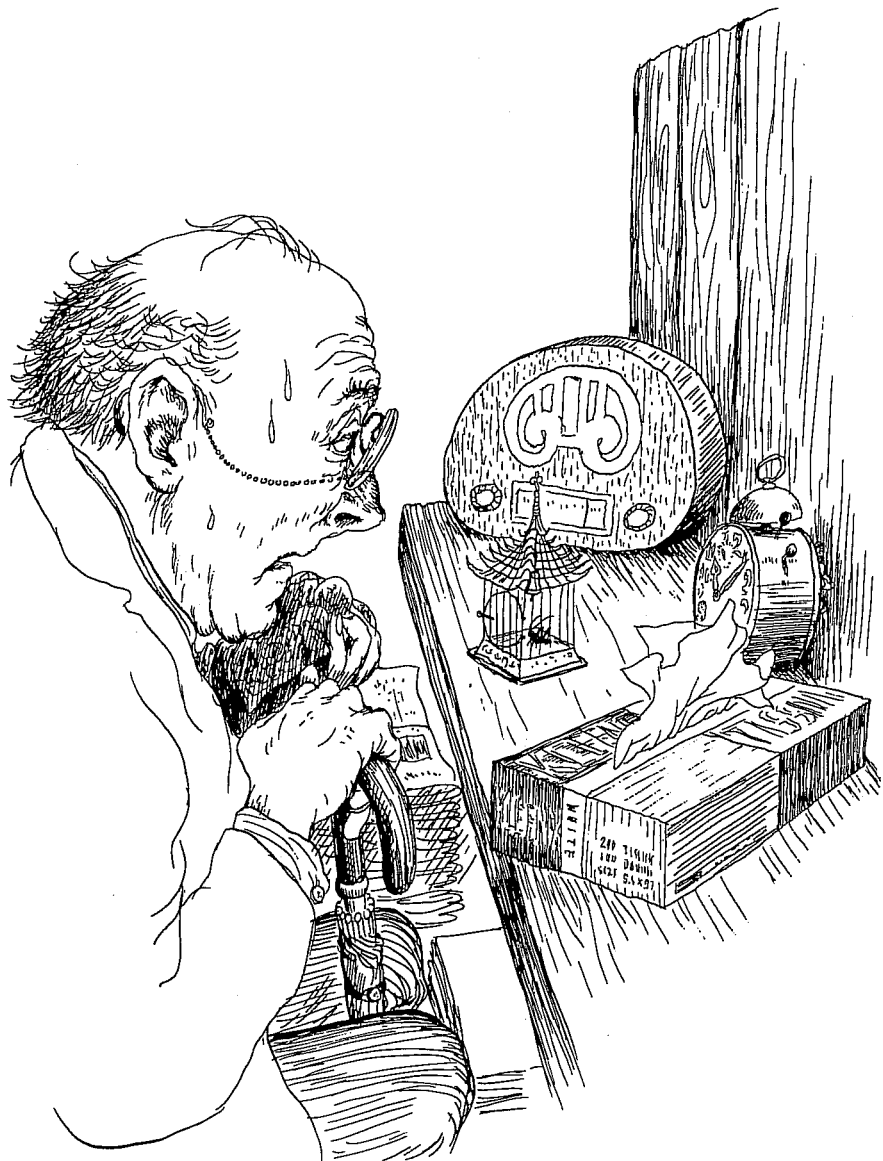
"Oh no," said Mario. "Just listen. He'll do it again."

Chester took a sip of water and was ready to play some more. This time, however, instead of "Rock of Ages," he launched into a stirring performance of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

Mr. Smedley's eyes popped. His mouth hung open and the color drained from his face.

"Do you want to sit down, Mr. Smedley?" asked Papa. "You look a little pale."

"I think perhaps I'd better," said Mr. Smedley, wiping his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "It's rather a shock, you know." He came inside the newsstand and sat on the stool so his face was just a few inches away from the cricket cage. Chester chirped the second verse of "Onward Christian Soldiers," and finished with a soaring "Amen."



The Cricket in Times Square

"Why, the organist played that in church this morning," exclaimed the music teacher breathlessly, "and it didn't sound *half* as good! Of course the cricket isn't as loud as an organ—but what he lacks in volume, he makes up for in sweetness."

"That was nothing," said Papa Bellini proudly. "You should hear him play *Aida*."

"May I try an experiment?" asked Mr. Smedley.

All the Bellinis said "yes" at once. The music teacher whistled the scale—do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do. Chester flexed his legs, and as quickly as you could run your fingers up the strings of a harp, he had played the whole scale.

Mr. Smedley took off his glasses. His eyes were moist. "He has absolute pitch," he said in a shaky voice. "I have met only one other person who did. She was a soprano named Arabella Hefflefinger."

Chester started to play again. He went through the two other hymns he'd learned—"The Rosary" and "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"—and then did the violin concerto. Naturally, he couldn't play it just as it was written without a whole orchestra to back him up, but he was magnificent, all things considered.

Once Mr. Smedley got used to the idea that he was listening to a concert given by a cricket, he enjoyed the performance very much. He had special praise for Chester's "phrasing," by which he meant the neat way the cricket played all the notes of a passage without letting them slide together. And sometimes, when he

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had been deeply moved by a section, the music teacher would touch his chest over his heart and say, "That cricket has it *here!*"

As Chester chirped his way through the program, a crowd collected around the newsstand. After each new piece, the people applauded and congratulated the Bellinis on their remarkable cricket. Mama and Papa were fit to burst with pride. Mario was very happy too, but of course he had thought all summer that Chester was a very unusual person.

When the playing was over, Mr. Smedley stood up and shook hands with Papa, Mama, and Mario. "I want to thank you for the most delightful hour I have ever spent," he said. "The whole world should know of this cricket." A light suddenly spread over his face. "Why, I believe I shall write a letter to the music editor of *The New York Times*," he said. "They'd certainly be interested."

And this is the letter Mr. Smedley wrote:

To the Music Editor of *The New York Times* and
to the People of New York—

Rejoice, Oh New Yorkers—for a musical miracle has come to pass in our city! This very day, Sunday, August 28th, surely a day which will go down in musical history, it was my pleasure and privilege to be present at the most beautiful recital ever heard in a lifetime devoted to the sublime art. (Music, that is.) Being a musicologist myself, and having graduated—with honors—from a well-known local school of music, I feel I am qualified to judge such

The Cricket in Times Square

matters, and I say, without hesitation, that never have such strains been heard in New York before!

"But who was the artist?" the eager music lover will ask. "Was it perchance some new singer, just lately arrived from a triumphant tour of the capitals of Europe?"

No, music lovers, it was not!

"Then was it some violinist, who pressed his cheek with love against his darling violin as he played?"

Wrong again, music lovers.

"Could it have been a pianist—with sensitive, long fingers that drew magic sounds from the shining ivory keys?"

Ah, music lovers, you will never guess. It was a cricket! A simple cricket, no longer than half my little finger—which is rather long because I play the piano—but a cricket that is able to chirp operatic, symphonic, and popular music. Am I wrong, then, in describing such an event as a miracle?

And where is this extraordinary performer? Not in Carnegie Hall, music lovers—nor in the Metropolitan Opera House. You will find him in the newsstand run by the Bellini family in the subway station at Times Square. I urge—I implore!—every man, woman, and child who has music in his soul not to miss one of his illustrious—nay, his *glorious*—concerts!

Enchantedly yours,
Horatio P. Smedley

P.S. I also give piano lessons. For information
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