

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."

Chester's antennae twitched in pleasure. He couldn't help remembering Mr. Fong's words to Mario about how sometimes a grain takes time to shed its husk.

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

The Cricket in Times Square

"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. "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

Mr. Smedley

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.”

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.

* * *



Mr. Smedley

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.

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

The Cricket in Times Square

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."

"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*."



The Cricket in Times Square

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

Mr. Smedley

As Chester chirped his way through the program, a crowd collected around the newsstand. After each new piece, the people applauded and congratulated the Bel-linis 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 life-time devoted to the sublime art. (Music, that is.) Being a musicologist myself, and having

The Cricket in Times Square

graduated—with honors—from a well-known local school of music, I feel I am qualified to judge such 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.

Mr. Smedley

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
write to:

H. P. Smedley
1578 West 63rd Street
New York, N.Y.

THIRTEEN

Fame

The music editor of *The New York Times* was quite surprised to get Mr. Smedley's letter, but he believed in the freedom of the press and had it printed on the theatrical and musical page of the paper. The next morning, thousands of people—at home over the breakfast table and on buses and trains coming into New York—read about Chester.

The Bellinis got to the newsstand very early. Papa opened the *Times* bundle and thumbed through a copy looking for the letter. When he found it, he read it aloud to Mama and Mario. Then he folded the paper and put it back on the stack to be sold.

"So," said Papa. "We have a celebrity in our midst."

The celebrity was just at that moment having himself a big yawn in the cricket cage. He had been up most of

Fame

the night with his manager and Harry Cat, learning new pieces. After eating breakfast and having another stretch, he tested his wings against each other, like a violinist making sure that his violin is in tune. The wings were fine. This time of year they almost itched to chirp. Chester ran over the scales a few times and started to play.

His first selection was something he had heard the night before called "A Little Night Music." It was by a man named Mozart. Chester and Tucker and Harry had all been delighted by "A Little Night Music." They thought it was a very good piece for the cricket to learn because they had heard it first at night, and also because Chester was quite a little person himself. It was lovely music too, with little tunes that sounded like insects hopping around and having a grand time.

As Chester played, the station began to fill up with the usual commuters. People collected around the newsstand—some drawn by the chirping, and others because they wanted to see the cricket they'd read about. And as always in New York, when a little crowd formed, more people came just to see what the others were looking at. Bees do that, and so do human beings.

Somebody asked who was playing.

"A cricket," a man answered.

"Oh, stop joking!" the first man said, and burst out laughing.

The Cricket in Times Square

In front of him a little lady with a feather in her hat, who was enjoying the music, turned around and whispered "Shhhh!" very angrily.

In another part of the station a man was reading Mr. Smedley's letter, and two other men were also reading it over his shoulders.

"My gosh!" said the one on the right. "A cricket. Who would have believed it?"

"It's a fake," said the man on the left. "Probably a record."

The man in the middle, who owned the paper, snapped it shut. "It *isn't* a fake!" he said. "It's a little living creature—and it sings beautifully! I'm going to give up my season ticket to the Philharmonic."

Everywhere people were talking and arguing and listening to Chester.

Mario made a pile of old magazines and put the cricket cage on top of them so everyone could see better and hear more clearly. When Chester finished one number, a shout of "More! More!" rang through the station. The cricket would catch his breath, have a sip of water, flex his wings, and begin a new selection as fast as he could.

And the crowd grew and grew. Mama Bellini had never seen such a crowd around the newsstand. But she wasn't one to be so dazed by good fortune that she missed

Fame

out on such a chance. Taking a bundle of the *Times* under one arm, she worked her way around, murmuring softly—so as not to disturb the music lovers—“Read about the cricket, read about the cricket, it’s in *The New York Times*.”

People snapped up the papers like candy. Mama had to keep going back to the newsstand for new loads. And in less than half an hour the whole stock of the *Times* had been sold.

“Don’t sit with your eyes shut,” Mama whispered to Papa. (Papa Bellini was one of those people who enjoy listening to music most with their eyes closed.) She put a bunch of *Musical Americas* into his arms. “Try these—it’s a good time now.”

Papa sighed, but did as she asked him. And in a little while all the copies of *Musical America* were gone too. It is safe to say that there had never been such an interest in music in the Times Square subway station as there was on that morning.

Over in the drain pipe Tucker Mouse and Harry Cat were listening too—Harry with his eyes closed like Papa Bellini. There were so many human beings that they couldn’t even see the newsstand. But they could hear Chester, chirping away, on the other side of all the heads and legs and backs. His clear notes filled the station.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said Tucker between pieces.



Fame

"Look at them all. There's a fortune in this. I wish one of us was big enough to pass the hat."

But Harry only smiled. He was happy right where he was, just sitting, enjoying the music.

And the crowd kept on growing. That first day alone, there were seven hundred and eighty-three people late to work because they had stopped to listen to Chester.

During the next few days, other papers besides the *Times* began to run articles on the cricket. Even *Musical America* sent an editor (an assistant editor) down to hear a recital. And Chester was news on radio and television. All the announcers were talking about the remarkable insect who was delighting throngs in the Times Square subway station.

The Bellinis decided that the best times for Chester to play were early in the morning and late in the afternoon, since that was when the station was fullest. Concerts began at 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. and usually lasted an hour and a half—not including encores.

Business boomed at the newsstand. Mama made sure that extra loads of magazines and newspapers were delivered. But even so, by closing time they had sold out completely. Mama Bellini, by the way, turned out to be the best friend a cricket ever had. At noon she would rush home and fix Chester some delicacy for lunch, like a miniature fruit salad or an entire vegetable dinner so

The Cricket in Times Square

small you could serve it on a silver dollar. Chester really preferred his mulberry leaves, but he ate everything so as not to hurt her feelings.

Mr. Fong, who had seen Chester's picture in the paper, brought his brother, the professor, to hear several of Chester's programs. When they visited, they always brought fresh mulberry leaves.

Mr. Smedley was there at least once a day too. He brought a tape recorder and made recordings of all the new pieces Chester learned. And during the intermissions—there was always an intermission of ten minutes halfway through the concert—he delivered short talks on musical appreciation to the audiences.

So by Thursday Chester Cricket was the most famous musician in New York City. But now here is a strange thing: he wasn't really happy—not the way he used to be. Life didn't seem to have the fun and freedom it had had before.

For one thing, although he thought that glory was very nice, Chester found that it made you tired. Two concerts a day, every day, was an exhausting program. And he wasn't used to playing on schedule. Back home in the meadow, if the sun felt nice, or the moon was full, or if he wanted to have a musical conversation with his friend the lark, he would chirp because the mood was on him.

Fame

But here he had to begin performing at eight and forty whether he felt like it or not. Of course he was very glad to be helping the Bellinis, but a lot of the joy was gone from his playing.

And there was something else: Chester didn't like being looked at. It wasn't so bad while he was playing. Everyone was quiet, enjoying the music. But after the performance was over, the human beings crowded around and put their faces down close to the bars and poked their fingers through. Souvenir hunters had taken his paper cup and even the pieces of mulberry leaves that were left over. Chester knew they didn't mean any harm—but he couldn't get used to the idea that millions of eyes were staring at him. It got so bad that when the concerts were over, he took to crawling into the matchbox and pushing up a piece of Kleenex to block the entrance.

Then, on Thursday, three things happened that upset him very much. The first was September. It was the first day of a new month. Chester happened to glance up at the top of a copy of the *Times*, where the date was, and there he saw it: SEPTEMBER 1—a new month, and a new season too. Autumn was almost upon them. For some reason the thought of September, with all its changes, made Chester feel very small and lost.

And that evening, while he was playing, a brown



Fame

leaf, the first leaf of the fall, blew into the station and landed right next to the cricket cage. Now, this leaf had come from New Jersey. A playful gust of wind danced it over the Hudson River, and up Forty-Second Street, and whisked it down the subway entrance. Chester was in the middle of a song when the leaf came down. It was such a shock to see this little reminder of all that was happening in the country that for a moment he couldn't continue. But then he realized where he was and forced himself to go on. Mario was the only one who noticed the break in the playing.

But the worst thing happened after the concert was over. Chester was leaning up against the matchbox when suddenly two fingers began to work their way through the bars of the cage toward the little silver bell. They weren't Mama's fingers, or Papa's, or Mario's—Chester knew the hands of the Bellinis. Somebody was trying to steal the bell! The cricket chirped an alarm just as the man was about to pull it down.

Papa turned around, saw what was happening, and shouted, "Hey! What are you doing?" The man disappeared into the crowd.

Mama and Mario had been outside selling off the last of the day's papers. They came running back to the newsstand. "What is it?" panted Mama.

The Cricket in Times Square

"A thief," said Papa.

"Is my cricket all right?" asked Mario anxiously.

"Yes," said Papa. "He's in the matchbox."

Mario picked up the box and looked in. There was Chester, piling a Kleenex against the opening. "You can come out now," the boy said. "It's safe," but Chester wouldn't come out. Mario had noticed that the cricket took to hiding after each recital, and it worried him.

Mama Bellini was convinced that the man was a kidnapper—or rather, cricketnapper—not just a thief. But Papa told them how he had been going straight for the bell.

"That bell belongs to my cricket," said Mario. "Mr. Fong gave it to him." He unfastened the bell and put it way back in the cash register drawer, next to Mama's earring, so it wouldn't tempt anyone else.

Chester was still hiding in the matchbox. Mario gently pulled the Kleenex away and whispered, "Please come out." Chester stirred and chirped, but stayed where he was.

"What's the matter with him?" said Papa.

"I think he may be sick," said Mario. He coaxed Chester with a mulberry leaf. The cricket poked his head out of the matchbox. When he saw that the crowd had broken up, he jumped into the palm of Mario's hand.

Fame

"You should take him to a bug doctor," said Mama.
"What do you call them?"

"Entomologists," said Mario, holding the leaf for Chester to nibble.

"Take him to an entololomist," said Mama.

"He might just be tired," said Papa. "We could give him a rest for a few days."

Chester had eaten as much of the leaf as he wanted. He gave a short chirp for "Thank you" and jumped back in the box.

"He isn't happy anymore," said Mario.

"How do you know?" said Mama.

"I can tell," said Mario. "I know how I'd feel if I were a cricket." Mario put the matchbox in the cricket cage. "Next week school begins," he said. "You've got to promise you'll take good care of him while I'm not here."

"We will, Mario," said Papa. "We like him too, you know."

The boy stood looking down at the cage. His forehead was drawn together in a worried frown. "I almost wish he hadn't come to New York—if he isn't going to be happy here," he said finally.

Chester heard him and thought about what he had said. He thought about it while the Bellinis were fitting on the cover. And later, in the darkness, after they'd gone

The Cricket in Times Square

home, he was still thinking about it. Then, quickly, like a lock snapping into place, something was decided in his mind. Chester felt very relieved after the decision had been made. He sighed, and his wings and his legs all relaxed as he waited there for Tucker Mouse.

FOURTEEN

Orpheus

Chester didn't have long to wait. In a few minutes Tucker came bounding into the newsstand and up to the stool and the shelf. Harry followed him, ambling silently along, as always.

Tucker Mouse took himself very seriously now that he was the manager of a famous concert artist. "Good evening, Chester," he said. "You should excuse the suggestion, please, but I thought your tempo was off tonight in the 'Stars and Stripes Forever.' You can't afford to relax just because you're on top, you know. And now, let us begin the practicing."

Chester crawled out of the matchbox. "Can't I even say hello to Harry?" he asked.

"So say hello!" said Tucker Mouse. "Hello,

The Cricket in Times Square

Harry—Hello, Chester. So, the greetings being over, let us get on with the practicing.”

Chester looked at Harry and shook his head. The cat smiled and winked.

Tucker twisted the dial. Wearily Chester crossed his wings into the position for playing. There was an Irish jig on the radio. The cricket prepared to fling himself into the first wild strains of the jig, but suddenly he dropped his wings and said, “I’m just not up to it tonight.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Tucker.

“I don’t feel like playing,” said Chester.

“You don’t feel like playing!” the mouse exclaimed. “That’s like the sun saying, ‘I don’t feel like shining.’”

“Well, sometimes there are cloudy days,” said the cricket. “Can’t I have a rest too?”

“Um um um—” Tucker Mouse was very much flustered.

“Let him take a day off,” said Harry Cat. “What’s the matter, Chester? Is fame beginning to get you down?”

“I guess I’m just feeling Septemberish,” sighed Chester. “It’s getting toward autumn now. And it’s so pretty up in Connecticut. All the trees change color. The days get very clear—with a little smoke on the horizon from burning leaves. Pumpkins begin to come out.”

“We can go up to Central Park,” said Tucker. “The trees change their color there too.”

Orpheus

"It isn't the same," said Chester. "I need to see a shock of corn." He paused and fidgeted nervously. "I didn't mean to tell you yet, but you may as well know. I'm going to—I'm going to retire."

"Retire!" shrieked Tucker Mouse.

"Yes, retire," said Chester softly. "I love New York, and I love to have all those people listen to me, but I love Connecticut more. And I'm going home."

"But—but—but—" Tucker Mouse was spluttering helplessly.

"I'm sorry, Tucker, but I've made up my mind," said Chester.

"What about Mario?" said the mouse.

"He wants me to be happy," Chester answered. "He said he wished I'd never come to New York if I was going to be miserable."

"But all the human beings!" Tucker waved his front legs. "All the suffering thousands your playing gives pleasure to—what about them?"

"My playing gives pleasure to a lot of people in Connecticut too," said Chester.

"Who?" asked Tucker Mouse scornfully.

"Oh—woodchucks and pheasants and ducks and rabbits, and everybody else who lives in the meadow or the brook. I had a bullfrog tell me once that he enjoyed my music more than anything else—except the sound of

The Cricket in Times Square

rain on the pond where he lived. And another time a fox was chasing a rabbit around my stump, and they both stopped to listen while I was playing.”

“What happened?” said Tucker.

“The rabbit made it to his hole,” said Chester. “I began the fox’s favorite song just as he was about to chase him again, and he stayed to listen. Now I couldn’t do that for any human being in the subway station.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Tucker Mouse. He turned to the cat. “Harry, say something! Make him stay!”

“Yes, Harry,” said Chester. “What’s your opinion?”

Harry Cat sat perfectly still a moment. His whiskers were wiggling, which was a sign that he was thinking very hard.

“My opinion,” he said finally, “is that it’s Chester’s life and he should do what he wants. What good is it to be famous if it only makes you unhappy? Other people have retired at the peak of their careers. In all honesty, however, I must add that I will be dreadfully sorry to see him go.”

Tucker Mouse scratched his left ear—always a good sign. Something about that phrase—“peak of their careers”—struck his imagination. “There would be a lot of glory, I suppose,” he said. “Giving everything up—just when he’s on top. What a *gesture!*” The idea took hold of his tiny mouse’s mind. “I can see it all now. At the

Orpheus

summit of his success—that's the same as the peak of his career, isn't it?"

"Just the same," said Harry Cat, grinning at Chester.

"At the summit of his success—he vanishes!" Tucker raced back and forth on the shelf. "The papers will go wild! Where is he? Where did he go? Nobody knows. He leaves behind only a beautiful memory. How touching! How lovely!" His voice cracked.

"The only thing that worries me," said Chester Cricket, "is what will happen to the newsstand if I go."

"Don't worry about that," said Harry Cat. "This newsstand has been touched by the Golden Finger of Fortune! They'll probably make a national park out of it."

"Do you really think so?" said Chester.

"Well, even if they don't," Harry answered, "I'm sure the Bellinis will do very well. They're famous now too."

"So when do you plan to make it final?" asked Tucker.

Chester thought a moment. "Today is Thursday," he said. "How about tomorrow night?"

"Friday is an excellent day for retiring," said the mouse. "If I ever retire from scrounging, it will be on a Friday."

Chester Cricket heaved a big sigh. "Oh—I feel better," he said. "If you want me to learn some new pieces for tomorrow now, I will."

The Cricket in Times Square

"Why bother?" said Harry Cat. "Tonight's your last full night in New York. You may as well enjoy yourself."

"Come to the drain pipe!" said Tucker Mouse. "We'll have a party in honor of your retirement. I have plenty of food—and no matches to burn the place up!"

So the three friends hopped, scuttled, and padded across to Tucker's home, where a fine farewell feast was held. And it was thoroughly enjoyed by all.

The next day, at five minutes to six, Chester was about to begin the last public piece he would ever play in New York City. It was Friday night, the busiest time of all. Besides the commuters coming home from work, the station was swarming with men and women who were leaving the city for the weekend, on their way to Grand Central Station. But they all stopped to listen to Chester. There were so many people crowded around the newsstand that the police had to keep the aisles to and from the subway trains open with ropes.

The cricket had just finished his most beautiful concert. For this final encore he wanted to play the sextet from an opera called *Lucia di Lammermoor*. It had been written for six people, but even though he was very talented, Chester could do only one part. So he took the



The Cricket in Times Square

tenor's music because it carried the main theme most of the time.

They didn't know it, but Chester was playing the sextet in honor of the whole Bellini family. It was Papa's favorite of favorites, and Mario and Mama loved it too. Chester wanted them always to remember him playing this piece. As he struck up the first notes, a sigh of pleasure came from Papa Bellini and he settled back on the stool with his eyes closed. Mama leaned against the side of the newsstand, resting her head on one hand. At the sound of the familiar strains, without her meaning to, a smile spread over her face. Mario was bending over the cricket cage, fascinated by the way Chester moved his wings when he played. And he was awfully proud that it was his pet that everyone was listening to.

Over in the drain pipe opening, Tucker and Harry were sitting side by side. The animals were the only ones who knew that it was his farewell performance, and it made them feel solemn and a little sad. But the music was so sweet that they couldn't help but be happy too.

"It's the sextet from *Loochy the Murmurer*," announced Tucker Mouse, who had become quite an expert on all things musical during the past week.

"Too bad there aren't five other crickets like Chester," whispered Harry Cat. "They could do the whole thing."

Orpheus

Then they too were silent, and for as long as the music lasted, no one moved a hair or a whisker.

Chester's playing filled the station. Like ripples around a stone dropped into still water, the circles of silence spread out from the newsstand. And as the people listened, a change came over their faces. Eyes that looked worried grew soft and peaceful, tongues left off chattering, and ears full of the city's rustling were rested by the cricket's melody.

The men at the other newsstands heard Chester and stopped shouting for people to buy their newspapers and magazines. Mickey the counterman heard him and left off making a Coca-Cola. Three girls came to the door of the Loft's candy store. Passengers coming up from the lower level paused before asking the policemen for directions. No one dared break the hush that had taken hold of the station.

Above the cricket cage, through a grate in the sidewalk, the chirping rose up to the street. A man who was walking down Broadway stopped and listened. Then someone else did. In a minute a knot of people was staring at the grate.

"What is it?"

"An accident?"

"What's happening?"

Whispers passed back and forth in the crowd. But as

The Cricket in Times Square

soon as there was a moment of silence, everyone could hear the music.

People overflowed the sidewalk into the street. A policeman had to stop traffic so nobody would get hurt. And then everyone in the stopped cars heard Chester too. You wouldn't think a cricket's tiny chirp could carry so far, but when all is silence, the piercing notes can be heard for miles.

Traffic came to a standstill. The buses, the cars, men and women walking—everything stopped. And what was strangest of all, no one minded. Just this once, in the very heart of the busiest of cities, everyone was perfectly content not to move and hardly to breathe. And for those few minutes, while the song lasted, Times Square was as still as a meadow at evening, with the sun streaming in on the people there and the wind moving among them as if they were only tall blades of grass.

FIFTEEN

Grand Central Station

After the concert Mama and Papa Bellini had to go off for the evening. They left Mario in charge of the newsstand and told him they would be back later to help him close up. The boy took Chester out of the cricket cage, balancing him on one finger. He was glad that they were going to have some time to themselves for a change.

First he took a cardboard sign he had printed saying **NEXT CONCERT 8 A.M.** and leaned it up against the cage. "That'll keep people from bothering us about when you play next," he said. Chester chirped. But he knew he wouldn't be playing the next morning at 8 a.m.

"Now we have supper," said Mario. He unwrapped a fried-egg sandwich for himself and brought over a mulberry leaf from the cash register drawer for Chester.

The Cricket in Times Square

(The mulberry leaves were kept in the compartment next to the quarters.) For dessert there was a Hershey bar—a smidgin from one corner for Chester and the rest for Mario.

Then, after dinner, they began to play games. Leap-frog was one they enjoyed very much. Mario made a fist and Chester had to jump over it. The trick was that Mario could put his fist anywhere he wanted inside the newsstand, and Chester still had to land just on the other side of it. They kept score for half an hour. Chester had thirty-four hits to five misses—which was quite good, considering the hard places Mario found to put his fist.

Hide-and-seek was fun too. Mario closed his eyes and counted, and Chester hid somewhere in the newsstand. Since there were piles of papers all over, and since he was very small himself, the cricket found lots of good hiding places. If Mario couldn't find him in a few minutes, Chester would give a quick chirp as a hint. But it was hard to tell whether the sound came from behind the alarm clock, or from the Kleenex box, or from the cash register drawer. If Chester had to chirp three times, it was understood he had won the game.

About ten o'clock Mario began to yawn and they stopped playing. The boy sat on the stool, with his back resting on the side of the stand, and Chester gave him a private recital. He didn't play any of the things he'd

Grand Central Station

learned—just made up one of his own pieces as he went along. And he played very softly so the people in the station wouldn't hear and come over. He wanted this to be for Mario alone. As he listened, the boy's eyes slowly closed and his head dropped over on one shoulder. But through his sleep he could still hear the cricket's silvery chirping.

Chester ended his song and sat on the shelf, looking at Mario. A "psst" sound came up from the floor—just as it had on his first night in the newsstand. The cricket looked over. There was Tucker again, gazing up at him. It struck Chester what a funny but likable expression the mouse's face always wore.

"You better hurry," whispered Tucker. "Harry found a timetable and the train leaves in an hour."

"I'll be over in a minute," Chester called down to him.

"Okay," the mouse answered, and scooted across the station floor.

Mario's right hand was cupped in his lap. The cricket jumped down into the palm of it. In his sleep the boy felt something and stirred. Chester was afraid he would wake him up, but Mario only settled in a new position. The cricket lifted his wings and drew them lightly together. There was all of his love, and goodbye too, in that one chirp. Mario smiled at the familiar sound.



Grand Central Station

Chester looked around at the newsstand—the box of Kleenex, the alarm clock, Papa's pipe. When he came to the cash register, he paused. Quickly springing to the edge of the drawer, he vanished back into the darkness. When he came out again, the little silver bell was hooked over his left front leg. Holding it tight against him to muffle the tinkle, he jumped to the stool, to the floor, and out the crack.

"What's the bell for?" asked Tucker when he arrived at the drain pipe.

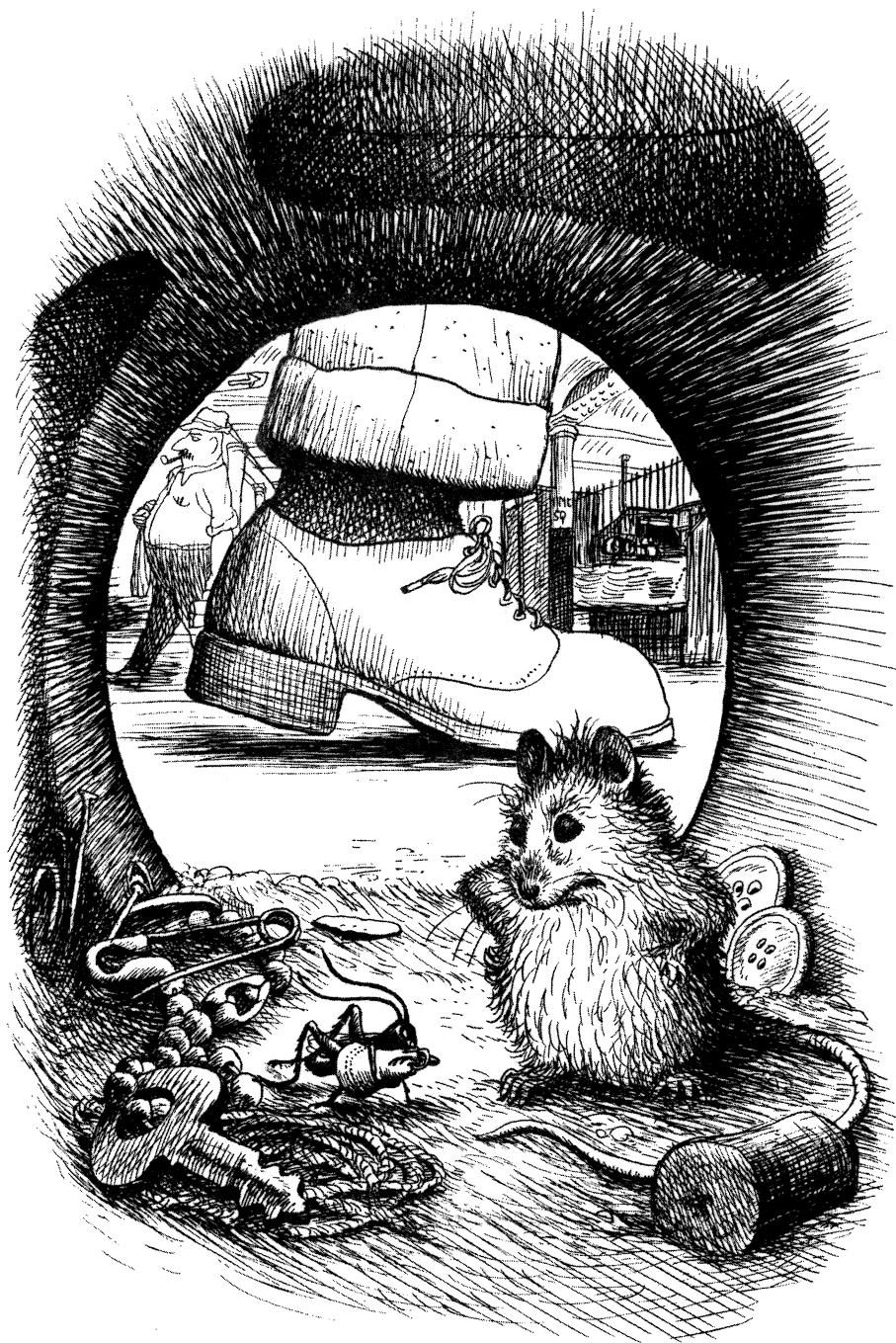
"It's mine," said Chester. "Mario said so. And I want it to remember everything by."

Tucker Mouse rummaged through the crowded corner of his home which was the pantry and found a tiny package bound with Scotch Tape. "I packed some supper for you to have on the train," he said. "Nothing very much—I mean, delicious, of course—a piece of steak sandwich and a chocolate cookie—but none too good for such talent!"

"Thank you, Tucker," said Chester. He wanted to sound very cheerful, but the words came out sort of gulpy.

"Well, I guess we should go," said Harry Cat.

"I guess so," said Chester. He took one more look through the drain pipe. From down the tracks came the murmur of the shuttle. Mario was still asleep in the newsstand. The neon lights shed their endless blue-green



Grand Central Station

glow. The cricket wanted to remember every detail. "It's funny," he said at last. "Sometimes the subway station looks almost beautiful."

"I've always thought so," said Tucker.

"Come on," said Harry Cat. He and Tucker padded along beside Chester up to the sidewalk.

Above ground the night was fresh and clear—not as hot as summer or as cool as autumn. Chester jumped up on Harry's back and took hold of the fur there. He could probably have made it down to Grand Central Station jumping by himself, but it saved time to be given a ride. And crossing the streets would have been a problem too for a cricket raised in Connecticut. But Tucker and Harry were experts at traveling in the city. Not a single human being saw them as they glided soundlessly under the cars that lined Forty-Second Street.

When they reached the station, Harry led the way through a maze of pipes and deserted rooms and back halls down to the level where the trains were. He was a great explorer, Harry Cat, and knew most of the secret ins and outs of New York City.

The Late Local Express was leaving on track 18. Chester hopped onto the rear platform of the last car and settled himself in a corner that would be out of the wind. And there were only a few minutes left before the train started.

The Cricket in Times Square

"How will you know when you get to Connecticut?" said Tucker. "You were buried under sandwiches when you left there."

"Oh, I'll know!" said Chester. "I'll smell the trees and I'll feel the air, and I'll know."

No one said anything. This was the hardest time of all.

"Maybe you could come back for a visit next summer," said Harry Cat. "Now that you know the way."

"A return engagement at the newsstand," said Tucker.

"Maybe I can," said Chester.

There was another pause. Then the train gave a lurch forward. And as soon as it started to move, the three friends all found that they still had millions of things to say. Harry shouted that Chester should take care of himself—Tucker told him not to worry about the Bel-linis, he would look after them—and Chester just kept chirping goodbye as long as he could.

For a while the two who stayed could see the cricket waving, but then the train rushed away into the darkness of the tunnel and was lost. They strained their eyes through the blackness.

"Did you hear another chirp?" said Tucker after a minute.

"Come on, Tucker," said Harry. "Let's go home."

Together they tramped up to Times Square and

Grand Central Station

down the drain. Neither one of them said a word. They looked out the hole. Mario hadn't woken up yet.

"He's going to be very unhappy," said Tucker.

Mama and Papa Bellini came up the stairs from the lower level, Mama gasping from the climb. Papa gently shook Mario awake. Suddenly Mama's gasping stopped and she said, "Where's the cricketer?"

They searched the newsstand completely but couldn't find him. Mama was sure that the man who tried to steal the bell had come back and kidnapped him. She wanted to call the police. Papa thought he might have stepped out for a breath of fresh air. But Mario was quiet, thinking. He looked through the cash register drawer, in every compartment, and then pulled the drawer out completely. The back space was empty—except for Mama's earring.

"He won't come back," said Mario.

"How do you know?" said Papa.

"The bell's gone," said Mario. "You and I and the cricket were the only ones who knew where it was. If a thief had taken it, he would have taken the money from the cash register too. My cricket took it and went home." Mario's voice dropped off abruptly. But then it came back firm. "And I'm glad."

Mama was about to exclaim that she didn't believe it, but Papa put his hand on her arm. He said he wasn't



Grand Central Station

sure—but it might be. Mario didn't say anything more, because he *knew*. They put on the cover to the newsstand and went down to their subway.

Tucker Mouse looked at Harry Cat. "He knows," he said.

Harry swished his tail around him and said, "Yes, he knows."

They were so relieved that for a minute neither of them moved. It was all right now. Chester was gone, but it was all right for everybody. After a while they went back and lay down on the shredded newspapers. But neither of them seemed to be able to fall asleep.

Tucker Mouse changed his position. "Harry," he said.

"Yes?" said Harry Cat.

"Maybe next summer we could go to the country."

"Maybe we can."

"I mean—the country in Connecticut," said Tucker.

"I know what you mean," said Harry Cat.

GEORGE SELDEN (1929–1989) was the author of *The Cricket in Times Square*, winner of the 1961 Newbery Honor and a timeless children's classic. People often asked Selden how he got the idea for *The Cricket in Times Square*. "One night I was coming home on the subway, and I did hear a cricket chirp in the Times Square subway station. The story formed in my mind within minutes." The popular Chester Cricket and His Friends series grew to seven titles, including *Tucker's Countryside* and *Chester Cricket's Pigeon Ride*.

GARTH WILLIAMS (1912–1996) illustrated the Chester Cricket and His Friends books and many other distinguished works, including *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte's Web*, and the Little House series.

STACEY LEE is a *New York Times*– and Indie–bestselling author of historical and contemporary young adult fiction, including *The Downstairs Girl*, a Reese's Book Club Late Summer '21 YA pick. A native of southern California and a fourth-generation Chinese American, she is a cofounder of the We Need Diverse Books movement and writes stories for all kids (even the ones who look like adults). Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @staceyleeauthor.