IS clothes were old and thin and the wind was sharp. The hand carrying the violin case was numb in its cotton glove, yet the heart of the Signor Giuseppe Valento was light and his eyes were smiling as only Italian eyes can smile. For clasped tight inside that cotton glove was an opera ticket—a ticket for "Carmen."

It might have been cause for a more ecstatic happiness had the opera been "Rigoletto" or "Trovatore" of blessed memory. But it would have been an ungracious soul to question so kind a fate, and the Signor was not ungracious—having indeed a most pathetic predisposition to gratitude and happiness. Therefore his eyes continued to smile as he walked along the ugly street where the dust blew in circles, and loose papers flapped dismally about in the cold dry wind.

From time to time he reassured himself with the sharp edge of the ticket against his palm. At the school of stage dancing where the Signor played daily and two nights a week for a sum too small to be worthy of mention here, the ticket, "complimentary," had been presented by a member of the opera house ballet and had found its way by a circuitous accident to the Signor’s possession.

It was a long walk to the Signor’s home, which consisted of a tiny room about the size of a closet in a West Side tenement; so he decided to dine nearer by in a humble Eighth Avenue restaurant, which represented, by the Signor’s present standard, the height of luxury.

Having occupied as much time as possible in the consumption of his macaroni and coffee, he started out again, by a nice calculation contriving to arrive just as the hands of the clock outside pointed half past seven. Picking his steps fearfully among the horses which plunged blindly from the blows of brutal or incompetent drivers, and dodging the impatient trolleys and the unobservant, hurrying foot passengers, he made his way toward the family circle entrance. The rush and crush of the new world were still alarming to the old Italian even after the fifteen years or more that he had lived in it.

He was a little dizzy and out of breath with the long climb to the upper gallery, for he had little to eat in these days, even for a frugal Italian. But he was quite, quite happy when he found himself seated there in the glare and warmth of the breathless family circle. It was a good seat of its kind, in the second row and near the front. About him were many of his countrymen, gay, noisy and
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exuding fumes of garlic. They were Italians of a very different class from the Signor, who, with his long gray hair brushed back from his pale ascetic face, looked like an aristocrat among them. Giuseppe was a Florentine and knew most of his neighbors for Neapolitans risen rapidly in this prosperous land from the ditch and the push cart to the proud profession of shop-keeping. The Signor’s fortunes, on the contrary, had deteriorated, as is often the case with the foreigner of the better class in this country, which, a paradise for the worker with hands or the man of a shrewd commercial turn, means often a slow starvation to the artist or idealist.

THE Signor was not an artist in the highest sense, being a violinist of little more than moderate ability, but an idealist he certainly was, an appreciator of beautiful things and sensitive; not good weapons with which to fight the world, but qualities productive of happiness upon such occasions as the present. Therefore the Signor’s troubles were soon forgotten in the witchery of Bizet’s music.

The Carmen of that night—which was a partial explanation of the Signor’s possession of the ticket—was not the passé French favorite of the public, but one Mirabelle, a young and comparatively unknown Austrian girl with a charming, even adorable, voice which was, however, distinctly small for the great opera house. She had a piquant, mobile face, whose charm was of suggestion rather than realization in the vast distance stretching between the Signor and the stage. What was not lost, and what grew upon the Signor’s imagination as the opera progressed, with an absolute fascination, were the girl’s little red-slippered feet. As he watched them, it began to dawn upon him that they were the most remarkable feet he had ever seen in a long and sophisticated career as observer of the feet of dancing ladies.

It was not merely when she bewildered the infatuated José with that taunting little dance that he felt their spell. It was that in every step she took they were so mysteriously part of the music and the words—such subtle implication of terpsichorean coquetry as the Signor had never dreamed of—a little step, a half movement and all the invisible shades of meaning beyond the spectrum of words were expressed. Ah, they were music, those feet, a delicate rhythmic music of dainty meanings!

The Signor was in an ecstasy. He knew music and dancing. Had not his wife been the most famous ballet dancer of his country? Ah, madonna, he knew the feet of genius when he saw them!
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He went home warm with the joy of it. He did not even know that the wind was cold. The melodies of Bizet, the sweet, naughty child voice of Carmen were forgotten save as a faint background to the visible music of her dancing feet. You would have said that Signor Giuseppe, the opera lover, was not aware it was an opera he had gone to.

The memory of it stayed with him through days of cold winds, rough words and insufficient food. The gentle Signor came to have an unfathomable scorn for the unimaginative feet of the girls for whom he played, for when one has beheld the feet of genius it is difficult to look tolerantly upon feet of clay.

He knew that he must see those little feet again. But how compass it? The wretched salary of the dancing school barely paid for his scant food and the tiny room over by the river. However the Signor began to save on his meals and the carfare he sometimes permitted himself on the coldest days—for the car was usually heated and hurried him out of the bitter street into the half-warm dancing hall.

WHILE this slow process was going on a change took place in the artistic fortunes of Mlle. Mirabelle. A shrewd theatrical manager, realizing the commercial value of her piquant charm, made her an excellent offer for light opera in a Broadway playhouse. As her services were not indispensable to the opera company, the change was accomplished painlessly, greatly to the young lady’s material advantage. In the smaller house her delicate art, lost in the vast perspective of the opera house, became more generally appreciated and she made that desirable impression upon the public and the box office known as a “hit.”

The change was an added advantage to the Signor also, for he could now obtain a family circle ticket for fifty cents and study those inspired, those incomparable feet at closer range and to greater advantage.

By the time he had acquired the necessary fifty cents a second piece of good fortune befell him. Another complimentary ticket was presented to him by a stage carpenter who described himself, as, by virtue of courtesies extended him in his professional capacity, fairly surfeited with dramatic entertainment.

What did the Signor then do with the fifty cents acquired by such painful economy? Spend all or a part of it on a respectable dinner or a pair of woolen mittens? Not at all. He had quite a different
plan. After a dinner whose simplicity might have put a fasting monk to shame, he went out in search of one Luigi, a boy of his own nationality living in the same block and employed by a florist to sell passé flowers in the street. That young gentleman having been withdrawn from an incipient fight with an Irish youth who had called him “Ginny,” the Signor entered into negotiations with him which resulted in his receiving a large and showy bunch of pink carnations in exchange for the fifty cents.

This done he expended three cents more at the combination stationery and cigar store on the corner for a sheet of pink paper and an envelope. Then, the flowers safely stored in his cold room, the Signor wended his way to the nearest branch post office to write the letter which he had previously composed with much labor and a stump of pencil on a fragment of wrapping paper.

“Dear Mademoiselle,” it read,

“I have seen to dance the great artistes of the world but never one have I seen with feet so beautiful like yours. When I watch them, dear Mademoiselle, I think that they dance on the heart of

“Giuseppe Valento.”

This written and carefully re-read for mistakes, the Signor sealed and directed it. As the last word was penned, one of the other visitors at the post office, pounding his stamp upon his letter with his fist after the fashion of the illiterate, shook a blot from the Signor’s pen upon his envelope. The Signor sighed deeply. It was his only envelope. He could afford no other. So the letter must go that way, sullied, into her dainty presence.

The first arrival at the entrance of the family circle was the Signor, carrying his flowers carefully wrapped in a paper with the note attached. And beyond even his memories or his dreams was the dancing of Mirabelle that night! He almost forgot the excitement of his flowers in the fresh marvel of her little feet. The operetta was—but what matter the name—a stringing together of tinsel tunes upon the intricate thread of a futile plot—the usual entertainment of its class. To such appreciators as the Signor the little feet told the real story and made the music. They smiled, they teased, they simulated; they mocked shyness, they pleaded, they accepted; they laughed, they triumphed naughtily and danced off like leaves fluttering in the wind. They would not have bent the grass they stepped upon, thought the Signor.
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With the applause at the end of the act he pressed close to the rail with his flowers uncovered. The moment had arrived.

She came forward bowing gayly and then the Signor threw his offering at her white slippered feet. It fell a little short and to one side, for the Signor was not muscular. They were not the only flowers, and alas, the curtain dropped and Mirabelle had not seen them! Two or three, broken by the fall from the high gallery, fell toward the center, and when, in response to the continued applause, Mirabelle repeated her last dance, she trod upon them and the Signor was radiant. "She has danced on my flowers," he exulted and asked no more happiness. But, as the curtain was falling again, Mlle. Mirabelle caught sight of the neglected pink carnations, and, catching them up in her arms, ran forward, smiling out at the unknown giver with her happy, kind little smile. Then the Signor was in heaven.

After that no more tickets came his way and he could only begin saving again for the next one. But there are degrees of poverty that make economy difficult.

One night he gave way to a temptation to visit the stage door; then a second and a third time he went, counting the wait in the cold as nothing beside the brief cheering glimpse of the gay feet and the merry face which never failed to give him a warm feeling about his heart. It was as cheering as a wood fire. The Signor saw, too, with the eyes of his heart, that it was a good little face and in his prayers he asked the madonna that no harm should come to her.

SOON after this on one of the nights when the Signor was engaged at the dancing school, the ballet master beckoned to him when the evening's work was over and told him that he would need his services no longer. A brother, recently come to America, was an accomplished violinist and would now fill the Signor's place.

Stunned, dazed, scarcely knowing where he was going or what had befallen him, the Signor went out into the icy street. A dry snow was falling, blown about in a fierce, uncertain wind. Too tired and confused to even think yet how he would get more work, with the discouraging under-consciousness of the bitter struggle it had been to find even this wretched position, the old Italian walked blindly through the heavy snow. After a time he began to think: he had the three dollars of his salary and his room rent was paid for the week. Three dollars to one of the Signor's frugal habits would last a long time while he looked for a new position. Three dollars—
yes, and the eighteen cents saved toward a ticket to see Mirabelle. With the thought of her, a faint sense of comfort came to the Signor, as the memory of the beautiful things has power to help the artist in his dark hour. With the thought came a longing to see her again. To watch the patter of the light feet over the pavement and catch that glimpse of the smiling face. It would somehow help him to bear this dull, cruel, new trouble that had come to him.

So the Signor once again bent his steps toward the stage entrance of the theatre to wait for the passing of Mirabelle.

As he stood there he noticed a young man he had observed once before waiting, and when at last she came the young man went quickly forward and walked to the cab with her, talking eagerly. He saw her shake her head. Then as the man spoke again, he fancied that the girl glanced in his direction before she entered her cab. The Signor could not hear their words, but this is what passed between them at that moment:

“Have you seen your latest conquest over there? Guess he hangs out here every night. No fool like an old fool, you know.”

And Mirabelle, with a quick glance at the boy’s weak impertinent face, replied, “So, and you think it proves him one old fool that he admires me! You do not flatter me, sir.” And with a cold nod she had closed the cab door in the face of the puzzled youth.

Mlle. Mirabelle did some thinking as her cab creaked heavily through the snow-filled side street, and she had a trick of thinking quickly. It was a sharpened, thin old face she had seen that instant in the cold electric light at the entrance. The man looked—it couldn’t be that he was—hungry.

She turned and called quickly up through the opening to the driver, “Go back again in that same street to the theatre. Drive slowly.”

As in obedience the cabman turned and went back, Mlle. Mirabelle kept a sharp lookout from the window and after a few yards saw a bent old figure ploughing slowly through the snow, carrying a violin case as if it were heavy in his hands.

Signalling the driver to stop, she pushed open the cab door and called out in her clear voice that was remarkably like a child’s:

“Signor Valento!”

The figure halted, and looked about in a bewildered fashion. She called again more loudly, “Here, Signor Valento.”

He located the direction of the voice then, and looked toward her. “Come here,” she called, her difficulty with the English giving an effect of severity to her voice. “I wish to speak with you.”
As he came up, wondering, she leaned out so that her face was visible in the street light. "You do not know me, Signor."
Belief dawned slowly in the Signor's eyes. "It is not possible—it is not—yes, yes, it is indeed the Mademoiselle Mirabelle!"
She gave him a keen glance. "Yes, it is the Mademoiselle Mirabelle. And you, I believe, are the Signor Valento who has sent me those so beautiful carnations, nicht?"
The Signor bowed. "I had the honor, Mademoizelle, to throw some flowers at your feet."
She looked again and saw that his hair was gray. She was young, as has been said, and impulsive.
"Signor Valento, I wish that you come in here with me. You shall come home with me and have supper. Yes? Und we shall have then a little talk, you und I."
He hesitated through the daze of unrealized joy, and she spoke again like a young woman whose word was law.
"Come quickly, Signor. You do not refuse my invitation."
And scarce knowing whether he was awake or dreaming, the Signor stepped into the cab.
"I am wet with the snow, Mademoizelle," he protested, "and I am not dressed to enter the house of a great lady." The old man hesitated as she motioned him to the seat beside her.
"I am not sugar that I should melt," Mirabelle's twinkling eyes reassured him, "and the clothes of men, they are all alike. So you also are a musician, Signor Valento."
He deprecated the association with a wave of the hand. "It is my profession, Mademoizelle."
"And you play—where?"
In the darkness the Signor flushed.
"Oh, I play—you would not know the place, Mademoizella. It is but a school of miserable stage dancing."
After a moment she said: "So—and you are so good to praise my dancing. You know dancing, then, as well as music."
"Ah, Mademoizella," the Signor interrupted, clasping his hands. "But I have never seen or dreamed of such dancing. So might the angels dance in heaven!"
Mirabelle smiled in the darkness. "I know not of the dancing of angels, Signor, but I am happy that mine has pleased you, for I like to dance. You have seen much beautiful dancing, you say in your letter. Where, then, Signor? In your own country I am sure. Will you not tell me all about it, please?"
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"I

N ROME, Mademoizella, where my wife was the première danseuse and the greatest dancer in Italy, and afterwards mistress of the ballet and there I play violin for opera. In Milano, also, have I seen, and in Firenze, which was my home. Here, too, in this country, have I seen great artistes and many young ladies who study to dance but no one—no, not one have I seen with feet like yours! They feel, they speak, those little feet, they are the feet of an angel."

The Signor paused breathless and Mirabelle laughed.

"You play in the orchestra in the opera of Rome, you say, Signor. Why, then, do you not play also in orchestra here?"

The Signor hesitated. "Once I have done so, Mademoizella, but with the Union I lose my place, and can never get back. One time I don't join strike and ever afterward they are angry at me."

"A stidge," Mirabelle repeated mystified. Unversed in the lore of the American union she did not understand, but accepted.

Then they arrived at the entrance of her hotel. The attendants, with the frank impertinence of the American hotel servant toward the unprosperous guest, stared at the shabby, apologetic figure in the wake of the dainty lady in rich furs. The Signor noticed it miserably, but forgot it when she smiled reassuringly at him in the elevator. And so cordially did she welcome him into the blue and gold glory of her reception room that it made the crude glitter seem almost homelike.

The Signor sat delicately upon a small stiff chair with an unhappy consciousness of his damp, worn garments. Mirabelle gaily flung off her fur wrap, disclosing a gown of quiet gray, but the Signor's eyes going lovingly to her feet saw that she still wore the silver slippers of her last act.

Bidding him lay off his overcoat she ushered him at once into the next room where a savory smelling supper was waiting. Mlle. Mirabelle with her quick eyes saw the look in the old Italian's face as he caught sight of the table and understood almost all that he could have told her. She had not always been as prosperous as she was today, and a warm heart beat in her light body.

SO SHE talked almost continuously through the wonderful meal, giving the old man ample opportunity to eat and small necessity for words. And when it was all over and the Signor was transformed with the food and the warmth and the happiness of her gay chatter into a new and radiant being, she rose in her quick, noiseless way and catching up his violin case pressed it into his hands.
"Play, play, Signor, I feel to dance. You know perhaps some dance of Hungary."

Yes, the Signor thought he did and with happy, trembling fingers opened his violin case and tuned his instrument; then tried over the opening measures of a Hungarian Czardas.

"Yes, yes, I remember," he murmured, and bowed into the melody, and Mirabelle began to dance, wildly, riotously, as those born to it can dance that mad dance. The Signor, intoxicated, played as if possessed.

At the end she threw herself into a chair breathing a little quickly, yet not out of breath. "So! You can play, Signor Valento! They have good music in your school."

Then a shade fell upon the shining face of the violinist. "I would that they thought so, Mademoizella. But they have this night sent me away. It was for that reason I went again to the stage door to see you, that I should not despair."

"Oh, it matters not," returned Mirabelle hurriedly. "We shall find you tomorrow another plaze."

The Signor's smile was subdued and he looked upon the floor. "It is not so easy, Mademoizella; but you speak kind words. I will hope."

"Yes," she contradicted him, severely. "It is easy, I tell you—you shall see. They need yet another violin in the theater. I myself will speak to the manager tomorrow. Think on it no longer, Signor."

"Oh, Mademoizella, at your theater!" The Signor was breathless with the vision her words had conjured up. It was too wonderful to be true. He shook his head.

She nodded vehemently. "Ja, yes, you shall see."

She could not know quite how much her words meant to the Signor. He dropped in his Italian fashion to his knees. "May I ask a great favor, Mademoizella?"

She nodded smiling. "It is that I may kiss your little feet."

She put out one of the inspired members with a delicious movement, smiling at him childishly and he left a reverent kiss upon the toe of her silver slipper. She rose with a little laugh and danced away, drawing off one slipper and hopping on the other foot while she waved her frivolous footwear in the air.

"Better still you shall have my shoe, Signor. It is yours to keep. I give it to you for one souvenir."
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For a moment the Signor stood staring at her is if he had not heard. When he spoke his voice was low and awestruck. "You mean it, Mademoizella?"

For answer she hopped gayly toward him holding out the slipper. The Signor received it as if it were some superlatively fragile object and stood long with it in his hand, looking down at it. When he raised his eyes she saw that they were full of tears.

"I have two other shoes, bellissima Signorina. I put this with them away. One, it is the shoe of my Maria, the shoe she wore the night she danced for the queen. The other is the shoe of the little Giovanna who died at six months. I put this also with them."

And as one handling a sacred thing the Signor hid the silver slipper in a sagging inner pocket of his coat.

"Nein, nein, it is but an old shoe," protested Mirabelle, hastily. "Otherwise I would not give it, Signor Valento." And still hopping lightly on one foot she escorted her guest to the door. There he paused a moment and took both her hands in his.

"I have known you a beautiful artiste, Signorina, an artiste and a genius. But to-night have I seen more. I see that you are an angel who has saved an old man from despair and given him a great happiness. But best of all I see that you are a good and kind little girl. It is a hard life in the theater. May Santa Maria keep you."

She met his eyes frankly. "I thank you, Signor." She waved him a gay little kiss on two fingers as he turned to look back from the elevator door, but when she had closed the door she used them to brush away two tears from her merry blue eyes.

The next day the Signor received a formal summons to call at the theater and meet the music director, and having played for him, found himself engaged at once. He went away in a confused dream of bliss. The salary, complained of not unjustly by the other musicians, meant untold luxury to the Signor. It meant good food, warm clothes, perhaps even a warm place to live in. But above and beyond all these things it meant a veritable passport to paradise. For from his seat there in the orchestra could he not now see nightly above the edge of the footlights the divine, the inspired feet of Mirabelle?