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## NEWS OF A POLISHED YOUNG MAN<sup>1</sup>

E.T.A. Hoffmann

*trans. John Louis Miller*

It is heart-warming when one realizes how culture is spreading. Yes, even certain members of formerly uneducated species have developed their talents to dizzying heights. In the house of the private financial consultant R\_\_\_ I once met a young man who combined infectious friendliness with the most extraordinary gifts. When I happened to mention my correspondence with my friend Charles Ewson in Philadelphia the young man gave me an open letter to mail-- a letter he had written to a lady friend in America. I've sent the letter, but I was so charmed by the gentleman that I felt compelled to keep a copy, as a memento of his great wisdom and genuine sensitivity to art.

I can't keep it secret that the extraordinary young man, by birth and original metier, was actually an ape, who had learned to speak, read, write, make music, etc., in the house of the financial consultant. One might sum up by saying that he had advanced in culture to the extent that he had won a host of friends, and with his artistic success and his charming manners he was welcome in every intellectual circle. His exotic ancestry was detectable only in occasional lapses, as for example that he sometimes executed extraordinary leaps in the *thés dansants* or the *hops-angloises* or that he couldn't hear nuts being cracked without a certain deep-seated emotion. Also--though this last might well have been said only out of the envy which always plagues genius--some held that in spite of his gloves he

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<sup>1</sup>*Nachricht von einem gebildeten jungen Mann*

occasionally scratched the ladies a bit as he kissed their hands. All the roguish little pranks of his younger years--for example snatching the hat off a person entering the house and then scurrying behind the sugar barrel--have now become witty *bon mots* which are greeted with jubilant applause.

Here is the remarkable letter, from which Milo's beautiful soul and magnificent education clearly speak.

### Letter of Milo, Educated Ape, to his Beloved Pip<sup>2</sup>, in North America

I still think with a kind of horror, dear one, of the unhappy time when I could express my heart's most tender thoughts only with clumsy sounds, unintelligible to any person of education. After all, how could that jarring, whining "Ae, Ae!" which I then uttered--even though accompanied by many a tender glance--express the smallest part of the deep, warm feeling which stirred in my manly, well-haired breast? Even my caresses, which you, sweet little friend, endured with quiet submission, were so awkward that I would blush over it now, if a certain characteristically robust complexion didn't prevent that sort of thing. I now kiss hands *à la Duport* and my caresses equal those of the best *primo amoroso*.

In spite of the great satisfaction my education among humans has brought me, I do still have moments of dismay, when characteristics of my former crude station remind me of my origin among a class of creatures for which I now have nothing but contempt. At such times I am foolish enough to think of our poor relatives, still hopping about in trees in vast, wild forests, nourishing themselves from fruits not made palatable through artful cuisine and--*most* painful memory--joining their voices in the

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<sup>2</sup>(Translator's note): "Pipi" (pee-pee) has the same associations in German as it does in English.

evening in certain hymns of which not a single tone is correct and which fit no discernable rhythm--not even the newly-discovered 7/8 or 13/4.

When I think of those unfortunate ones--with whom I now have nothing in common--I can't help feeling sorry for them. In particular I sometimes remember our old uncle (as I recall he was an uncle on my mother's side) who reared us in his ignorant manner and did everything possible to keep us distant from all that is human. He was a solemn, serious man, who was never inclined to put on boots. I can still hear his anxious cry as I gazed with burning desire at the beautiful new boots that clever hunter left standing under a tree. (At that moment I was in the tree, greedily devouring a coconut.) The boots were quite similar to those the hunter wore, and I saw how wonderfully they became him as he took his stance some distance away. Those shiny boots gave the whole man something which seemed to me so grandiose and *imposante* . . . No, I couldn't resist. The thought of going about in new boots, just as proudly as he, conquered my whole being. I sprang down from the tree and, just as if I had *always* worn boots, took the steel bootjack and forced my slender legs into this unaccustomed covering. Wasn't that already an indication of a great aptitude for learning and art waiting to be awakened within me? I admit I couldn't run in boots and you already know that the hunter walked up and with no further ado grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and dragged me off, while my old uncle screamed piteously and threw coconuts at us, one of which hit me quite hard behind the left ear (without his intending it this perhaps engendered new, wonderful intellectual capabilities in me)--all of that, dearest, you know, since you yourself ran howling, lamenting after your beloved and thus willingly surrendered yourself into captivity.

What am I saying . . . *captivity*? Hasn't this captivity given us the greatest freedom? What is

more wonderful than the edification of spirit we have achieved among the humans?

For I have no doubt, dear Pipi, that you, with your natural liveliness and quick understanding, certainly will have absorbed science and the arts in some small degree, and having that confidence, I differentiate you utterly from those rough relatives in the forest. Ha! Among them barbarism and complete lack of decorum still reign. They are utterly without feeling--dry-eyed and completely without depth of soul! Of course I must assume that you are not so advanced in your education as I, for I am, as they say, a Made Man. I know absolutely everything, and therefore might just as well be an oracle. My reign here in the realm of science and art is absolute.

You probably think, sweet little one, that it required enormous effort to reach this high level of culture. I can assure you to the contrary--that nothing in the world was easier. How I often laugh over the perspiration those youthful tree-to-tree jumping exercises cost me. I *never* experienced such difficulty becoming educated and wise. That happened entirely of itself, and it was harder to realize that I had reached the summit than it was to climb up to it, thanks to my glorious *ingenio* and my uncle's propitious coconut toss.

For you must know, dear Pipi, that intellectual aptitudes and talents lie like bumps on the head, and can be felt with the hands. The back of *my* head feels like a sack of coconuts, and uncle's lucky clout must have brought forth many a little bump, each with its own little talent. I literally have it all in the back of my head.

The urge to mimic, so basic to our species and so unjustly derided by humans, is not so much the irresistible impulse to achieve culture as to demonstrate the culture which is already within us. This same principle was adopted by humans long ago, and the truly wise ones (whom I always try to

emulate) do as follows: Someone finishes something, be it an art work or anything else. All exclaim: "That's superb!" Some clever person, immediately inspired, imitates it. Granted, it comes out somewhat differently, but he says: "This is the way it *should* be and that other work which you thought so marvelous only gave me the impetus to produce the *truly* superb which I had within me all along." It's about the same, dear Pipi, as when one of our compatriots accidentally cuts his nose while shaving--he gives his beard a certain distinctive flair never achieved by the man he copied it from.

Just this desire to mimic--which has always been a particular strong point with me--brought me into contact with a professor of aesthetics--the dearest man in the world--from whom I received my first insights into myself, and who also taught me to speak. Even before I developed this talent I was regularly in the company of witty and clever people. I had carefully observed their expressions and gestures and was sure I could mimic them perfectly. This and the proper clothing my patron provided me not only opened every door for me, but also furthered my image as a young man with a delicate air of the world.

How I longed to be able to speak! But I thought to myself: when you *can* speak, where will you get the thousand thoughts and fancies which stream from *their* lips? How will you talk about all those things when you hardly recognize their names? How will you deliver judgments on works of literature and art as they do, without the slightest experience in those fields?

As soon as I was able to utter a few connected words I revealed my misgivings to my beloved teacher, the professor of aesthetics. He laughed out loud and said: "What are you thinking, my dear Monsieur Milo? Speaking, speaking, *speaking* is what you must learn; everything else comes of itself. Fluent, eloquent, clever speaking! That's the whole secret! You will be astonished yourself how

thoughts will come to you while speaking, how wisdom will rise within you and, soaring aloft on the rush of your own words, how you will scale the heights of learning and art, even when you might think you're groping in the dark. Often you yourself won't understand what you're saying. That's precisely when you're caught up in the real fervor of speaking. To be sure, a little easy reading might prove helpful, and you can learn a few pleasant phrases which can be strewn about fortuitously and at the same time serve as a kind of refrain. Speak a great deal of trends of the times--of clear indications of this and that--of depth of feeling--of having and not having soul, etc."

Oh my Papi, how right the man was! Such *wisdom* came to me with the perfection of my speech! The felicitous play of my features gave weight to my words, and I have seen in the mirror what good effect my forehead--by nature somewhat wrinkled--makes when I flatly deny depth of soul to this or that poet. (Anything I don't understand couldn't amount to much.) My final test for any work of art or learning is whether it convinces *me*, and I have no hesitation in applying this test to everything. My judgment is *infaillible* because it gushes from me as if from an oracle.

I have busied myself with art in many ways--a little painting, sculpture, now and then some clay modeling (you, sweet little one, I portrayed as Diana of antiquity) but I soon got tired of all that diddling. Music alone had allure for me because only there can one astound and amaze a crowd without a lot of preparatory fuss. Because of my natural endowments the fortepiano soon became my favorite instrument. You know, my sweet, with the somewhat lengthy fingers nature has given me I can span a fourteenth, even two octaves. This and some agility in wiggling the fingers is the whole secret of fortepiano playing.

The music master shed tears of joy over the magnificent natural gifts of his pupil, for in a short

time I had advanced to such a degree that I could run thirty-second, sixty-fourth, and hundred-and-twenty-eighth-note runs up and down with both hands without a single slip. I can trill equally well with all fingers and can leap three, four octaves up and down, just as I used to jump from tree to tree. Obviously I am the greatest virtuoso alive. No available composition is difficult enough for me, so I compose sonatas and concertos myself, though in the latter the music master has to draw up the *tutti*, for who wants to bother with all those instruments! After all, the *tutti* in concertos are nothing more than a necessary evil and an opportunity for the soloist to rest up and get ready for further stunning feats.

I recently spoke with an instrument maker about building a fortepiano with nine to ten octaves. Does it behoove genius, after all, to limit itself to those pitiful seven octaves? Aside from the usual stops--the Turkish drum and cymbals--he is also to add a trumpet stop and a flute register to imitate the twitter of birds. You will note, dear Pipi, the sublime thoughts which come to a man of taste and education!

When I saw how much applause some of the singers were getting an irresistible desire came over me to sing, too, but it seemed to me that nature had utterly failed to provide me with the proper instrument for it. Still, while expressing my regret at not having a voice, I couldn't help revealing my ambition to a famous singer--who has since become my most intimate friend. He took me into his arms and exclaimed, full of enthusiasm: "Fortunate Monsieur, I have long noticed your musical talent and your innate physical flexibility. You are born to be a great singer, for the greatest problem is already overcome. By that I mean to say that nothing is so great a hindrance to truly artistic singing as a good natural voice. My constant challenge is to overcome this obstacle with young students who happen to

sing well when they come to me. Complete avoidance of all sustained tones, diligent practice of *roulades* which greatly exceed the normal range of the human voice, and above all the industrious development of the *falsetto*: the appropriate range for truly artistic singing. The most robust voice seldom withstands these exercises for long. But with you, Sir, there is no obstacle to overcome; in a short time you will be the greatest singer there is.”

The man was right. It required only a little practice to develop a magnificent *falsetto* and the ability to emit a hundred tones in one breath. This won me the accolades of all the aficionados and completely overshadowed the poor tenors who try to make do with their chest voices. Why, some of them can hardly get a *mordent* out! Right at the outset my teacher taught me three fairly long cadenzas, which contain the quintessence of all artistic song. These can be used first this way, then that, in their entirety or piecemeal, and sung in countless ways over the ground bass of just about any aria--instead of the melody provided by the composer. I cannot describe for you, my sweet, the delirious applause the execution of these cadenzas brought me, and you can see that even in music my natural, innate ingenuity has made everything delightfully simple.

About my compositions I have already spoken, but if not forced to it for the sake of having works worthy of my genius, I should gladly leave composing to those lowly individuals who are only there to serve us performers--that is, to prepare works in which we can display our virtuosity.

I must admit there is a “certain something” to filling a score with all that stuff. There are certain rules for ordering the different instruments so they sound together harmoniously, but for a genius, for a virtuoso, it’s all really much too dreary. Anyway, to gain respect in that area it’s enough just to be *considered* a composer. For example, after I receive a decent amount of applause from an aria I’ve

sung in concert, and the composer is present and the audience is about to turn some of the applause toward him, I remark quite casually, but with that certain dark, penetrating look (which with my characteristic physiognomy I manage surpassingly well) “Ah, yes, now I really must finish my new opera.” This little aside inspires everyone to new admiration, so that the composer, who really *has* finished something, is utterly forgotten.

It suits genius merely to have things accepted as *possibility*, and a true genius lets it be known how small and insignificant everything in art seems, compared to what he could produce in the same genre if only he felt inclined to do so and if mankind were worth the trouble.

Complete contempt for all efforts of others, steadfast determination to utterly ignore those who create quietly and then don't talk about it, complete satisfaction with that which comes lightly from one's own power--all of these are unmistakable attributes of cultivated genius and I'm happy to say that I observe each of these traits in myself daily . . . even hourly.

So now you can picture for yourself, sweet friend, the happy circumstance to which my advanced education has brought me. --But can I keep from you even the tiniest concern which is in my heart? Should I not confess to you, dearest, that there are still certain unforeseen occurrences which mar the sweet contentment of my days?

Heavens, what a powerful influence one's earliest teaching has on one's entire life! And it must be true that it is difficult to rid oneself of what one learned at one's mother's breast. What a problem my mad enthusiasm for wandering in the mountains and forests has been! Recently I went walking, elegantly clothed, with some friends in a park. Suddenly we were standing before a slender, magnificent, sky-high walnut tree. An irresistible urge overcame me--a couple of energetic leaps and I

was swaying high in the tips of the branches, snatching at the nuts! An astonished shriek from my companions attended my daring feat. As I climbed down, reminding myself that my acquired culture doesn't allow such excesses, a young man said to me quite respectfully: "But Monsieur Milo, how quick on your legs you are." But I couldn't help feeling ashamed.

In the same way, I can sometimes hardly suppress the desire to use my expertise in throwing things, once so much a part of me. Can you imagine, dear little one, that recently at a *souper* this urge so completely overcame me that I lobbed an apple into the wig of my former patron, the financial consultant, who was sitting at the opposite end of the table? This very nearly caused a scandal. I hope, however, to rid myself more and more completely of these vestiges of my former rough station.

If you aren't so culturally advanced, sweet little friend, that you can read this letter, may the noble, forceful strokes of your beloved's handwriting be an encouragement for you to learn to read, and then may the content of the letter be a store of wisdom for you, urging you toward that inner contentment associated with pinnacles of culture. The source of it all is inner *ingenio* and association with wise and educated human beings.

And now a thousand times adieu, sweet friend:

Doubt the brightness of the sun,  
Doubt the gleam of stars at night,  
Doubt that truth can lie to one,  
But have no doubt of my love's might!

Your  
Faithful unto Death,  
Milo,  
Formerly Ape, now Independent  
Artist and Learned Person.