



Valentine and His Violin

Philip Hopman

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Valentine is a slight boy with an enormous feathered flop of blond hair. He practices the violin with great dedication and appears oblivious to the effect it has on anyone within hearing range. His “Ode to Joy” sets teeth on edge, sends doves aloft, and terrifies small children; he’s uncertain why he’s asked to leave his own performance. Trying to comfort an old horse stuck in a ditch, his “Allegretto” not only revives the animal but moves him off at warp speed. And lets just say his abilities do wonders for a wolf with a bowel obstruction.

Valentine is hardly a complicated story; it’s told for laughs and very short. But Philip Hopman’s illustrations are lush and wonderful. When Valentine’s playing saves the life of a knight by scaring off a dragon, the knight begs his help; his castle is under siege. The palette is soft and gently blurred, but we can see elephants, warships, and soldiers crossing the moat and lowering the drawbridge while Valentine and the knight survey the scene from a distant hill. On the next page, Valentine has laid into the “Marche Militaire” and the scene is pure chaos: Elephants are jumping into the moat and barreling toward us, vikings are running for dear life with their hands over their ears, and a Brunhilde complete with cast-iron bustier appears to be harmonizing from the back of another escaping pachyderm. There are endless details to find in each scene; often just locating Valentine takes a degree of “Where’s Waldo”-like gazing, though it’s usually a safe bet to follow the fleeing crowd back to him.

All’s well that ends well, and Valentine’s concert for the grateful kingdom contains a bit of visual humor too sweet to spoil here; it even carries over onto the end papers. *Valentine and His Violin* is a trifle, but like that dish its sweetness is magnified by a significant layering of detail. Kids will have a great time hunting for specifics among the crowds; each character seems fully realized and like they could be running off to star in a book of their own. Based on this one, that would be a welcome development.

HEATHER SEGCEL (July 27, 2012)

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