

Handel

Handel was about five years of age when the wistful glances which he bestowed upon other children who were more fortunate than he in being permitted to learn music aroused the active sympathy of a kind friend, who procured for him a dumb spinet—a small harpsichord having its sound deadened by strips of cloth tied round the strings. The instrument was secretly conveyed to a lumber-room in the surgeon's house, where a corner had been cleared for its reception, and thither would Handel delightedly repair at such times as he could do so without attracting notice. Hour after hour would pass whilst thus enrapt, until the shades of [40]evening fell, or the moonbeams creeping across the instrument aroused him from his reverie. Often when the house was hushed in slumber the child would leave his bed, and steal away to the garret in order to commune with his beloved art. Day after day he laboured thus, mastering his difficulties one by one, his love and his genius preventing him from feeling the hardest work a drudgery.

For some time this secret practising continued without arousing suspicion on the part of the other inmates of the house. One night, however, when the child had resorted to his favourite spot, he was suddenly missed by those below, and, as it was known that he had been sent to bed, some fears were felt as to what could have become of him. The servants were summoned, but could give no account of him; the father was fetched from his study, whither he had retired, and a search began. The alarm increased when it was ascertained that the child was in none of the living-rooms of the house, and it was decided that the garrets and lofts must be searched. Calling for a lantern, the surgeon ascended the stairs leading to the lumber-room; it was possible that the boy might have found his way thither on some childish expedition, and there fallen asleep. Great was the father's surprise, on reaching the top-most landing, to hear faint musical sounds proceeding from behind the closed door. Noiselessly retracing his steps, he summoned the rest of the household, and then, ascending the stairs in a body, they paused outside to listen. Sure enough the old garret was full of melodic sounds! Now near, now far off, they seemed to the listeners to be wafted from another world; there was something uncanny about it, and the maids gazed into each other's faces with a scared expression, as the master softly lifted the latch, and, having peeped into the room, beckoned silently to the rest to follow him.

It might have been one of the angel choir itself whom these good people of the under-world had stumbled upon unawares! 'Meister G6rge,' lifting his lantern above his head, peered forward into the darkness, whilst the women clasped their hands in astonishment at the vision presented to their gaze. For there, seated before the spinet, was the white-robed figure of the child, his face half turned towards them, and his eyes, as they caught the light of the lantern, revealing the dreamy, rapt expression of one who is lost to every earthly surrounding.

This discovery does not seem to have produced any outburst of anger on the part of the father. Possibly he was touched by the child's devotion, or by his entreaties, and felt unwilling to deprive him of what, after all, he could only regard in the light of an amusement. At any rate, little Handel appears to have continued his practising without interruption. The progress which he made with his studies, however, made him long for an opportunity of hearing others play, and, very naturally, of being allowed to express his musical thoughts upon an instrument capable of responding with a fuller sound, though the fulfilment of this latter wish was more than he dared hope for whilst his father remained obdurate. One day, when Handel was seven years old, his father announced his intention of paying a visit to the castle of the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels to see his son—a step-brother of George Frederick—who acted as valet de chambre to the Duke. Handel was most anxious to be allowed to accompany his father, because he had heard that the Duke kept a great company of musicians to perform in his chapel. But the father refused his consent, and the boy turned away with a look of fixed determination in his eyes, which it was well, perhaps, that the elderly surgeon did not perceive. 'I will go,' muttered the boy to himself, as he sought the seclusion of his garret; 'I will go, even if I have to run every inch of the way!'

Handel did not know then that no fewer than forty miles lay between his home and the ducal castle, but having formed his bold resolution he awaited the moment when his father set forth on his journey, and then, running behind the closed carriage, he did his best to keep pace with it. The roads were long and muddy, and although he panted on bravely for a long distance, the child's strength began at last to fail, and, fearing that he would be left behind, he called to the coachman to stop. At the sound of the boy's voice his father thrust his head out of the window, and was about to give vent to his anger at George's disobedience; but a glance at the poor little bedraggled figure in the road, with its pleading face, melted the surgeon's heart. They were at too great a distance from home to turn back, and so Handel was lifted into the carriage and carried to Weissenfels, where he arrived tired and footsore, but supremely happy at having won his point.

Handel had certainly not formed too bright a picture of the musical delights of the Duke's home. The musicians were most friendly towards him, and, as he was by no means shy where his beloved art was concerned, they soon became good friends. His delight was great when he was told that he might try the beautiful organ in the chapel. The organist stood beside him and arranged the stops, whilst the child, with a feeling of coming joy that was almost akin to fear, placed his fingers upon the keys. The next moment his hesitation had vanished, and the sounds were coming in response—one minute low and deep, then mysteriously calling to him from distant corners of the dim galleries, like sweet angel voices which he had the power to summon by the pressure of his fingers. In his lonely garret, fingering his spinet, he had longed for such an opportunity as this, to be enabled to make the great organ-pipes sing to him in whispers, or to thunder back to him in grand, deep chords that would set the whole air vibrating with music. And now the opportunity he craved for had come, and he could speak his musical thoughts into this noble instrument, which had the power to draw from

the depths of his soul all that that soul contained. Ah, Handel was glad now that he had persevered and worked so hard at his music. He was glad, too, that he had undertaken that long, toilsome run behind his father's carriage, for it had brought to him the greatest joy of his life.

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