



# *The Lucky Peer - Parts XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, and XVII*

Hans Christian Andersen  
DanishNordicScandinavian

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*Intermediate*  
*41 min read*

Sometimes when Peer sat at the piano, there sounded tones in it which stirred thoughts in his breast and head. The tones rose into melodies that now and then carried words along with them; they could not be separated from song. Thus arose several little poems that were rhythmic and full of feeling. They were sung in a subdued voice. It was as if they were shy and timid in feeling, and moved in loneliness.

Like the wind our days are blown,  
No tarrying place is here;  
From cheeks the roses have flown:  
Perished the smile and the tear.

Wherefore, then, smitten with grief?  
Sorrow, too, taketh its flight,  
Everything fades like the leaf,  
Men and women, and daytime and night.

Vanishing, vanishing all!  
Thy youth, thy hope, and thy friend.

Like the wind, they heed not thy call,  
They vanish, nor turn hack again.

“Where did you get that song and melody?” asked the singing-master, who accidentally found the words and music written down.

“It came of itself, that and all this. They do not fly farther into the world.”

“A downcast spirit sets out flowers too,” said the singing-master, “but it dare not give counsel. Now we must set sail and steer for your next *début*. What do you say to Hamlet, the melancholy young Prince of Denmark?”

“I know Shakespeare’s tragedy,” said Peer, “but not yet Thomas’s opera.”

“The opera should be called *Ophelia*,” said the singing-master. “Shakespeare has, in the tragedy, made the Queen tell us of Ophelia’s death, and this is made to be the chief point in the musical rendering. One sees before his eyes, and feels in the tones, what before we could only learn from the narrative of the Queen.”

“There is a willow grows aslant a brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;  
There with fantastic garlands did she come  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them;  
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds  
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;  
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up:  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element; but long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay

To muddy death.”

The opera brings all this before our eyes. We see Ophelia: she comes out playing, dancing, singing the old ballad about the mermaid that entices men down beneath the river, and while she sings and plucks the flowers the same tones are heard from the depths of the stream; they sound in the voices that allure from the deep water; she listens, she laughs, she draws near the brink, she holds fast by the overhanging willow and stoops to pluck the white water-lily; gently she glides on to it, and singing, reclines on its broad leaves; she swings with it, and is carried by the stream out into the deep, where, like the broken flower, she sinks in the moonlight with the mermaid's melody welling forth about her.

In the entire scene it is as if Hamlet, his mother, his uncle, and the dead, avenging king alone were necessary to make the frame for the picture. We do not get Shakespeare's Hamlet, just as in the opera Faust we do not get Goethe's creation. The speculative is no material for music; it is the passionate element in both these tragedies which permits them to be rendered in a musical production.

The opera of Hamlet was brought on the stage. The actress who had Ophelia's part was admirable; the death scene was most effectively rendered; but Hamlet himself received on this evening a commensurate greatness, a fulness of character which grew with each scene in which he appeared.

People were astonished at the compass of the singer's voice, at the freshness shown in the high as well as in the deep tones, and that he could with a like brilliancy of power sing Hamlet and George Brown.

The singing parts in most Italian operas are a patchwork in which the gifted singers, men and women, work in their soul and genius, and then, out of the variegated colors given them, construct shapes as the progress of the poem requires; how much more glorious, then, must they reveal themselves when the music is carried out through thoughts and characters; and this Gounod and Thomas have understood.

This evening at the theatre Hamlet's form was flesh and blood, and he raised himself into the position of the chief personage in the opera. Most memorable was the night scene on the ramparts where Hamlet, for the first time, sees his father's ghost; the scene in the castle, before the stage which has been erected, where he flings out the words that are drops of poison; the terrible meeting with his mother, where the father's ghost stands in a vengeful attitude before the son; and finally, what might in the singing, what music at Ophelia's death! She became as a lotus flower upon the deep, dark sea, whose waves rolled with a mighty force into the soul of the spectators. Hamlet this evening became the chief personage. The triumph was complete.

“How came he by it!” said the merchant’s rich wife, as she thought on Peer’s parents and his grandmother up in the garret. The father had been a warehouse-man, clever and honorable; he had fallen as a soldier on the field of honor; the mother, a washer-woman,—but that does not give the son culture, and he grew up in a charity school,—and how much, in a period of two years, could a provincial schoolmaster instil into him of higher science.

“It is genius!” said the merchant. “Genius!—that is born of God’s grace.”

“Most certainly!” said his wife, and folded her hands reverently when she talked to Peer. “Do you feel humble in your heart at what you have received?” she asked. “Heaven has been unspeakably gracious to you. Everything has been given. You do not know how overpowering your Hamlet is. You have yourself created the representation. I have heard that many great poets do not themselves know the glory of what they have given; the philosophers must reveal it for them. Where did you get your conception of Hamlet?”

“I have thought over the character, have read a portion of what has been written about Shakspeare’s work, and since, on the stage, I have entered into the person and his surroundings. I give my part and our Lord gives the rest.”

“Our Lord,” said she, with a half-reproving look. “Do not use that name. He gave you power, but you do not believe that he has anything to do with the theatre and opera!”

“Most assuredly I do!” said Peer, courageously. “There also does he have a pulpit for men, and most people hear better there than in church.”

She shook her head. “God is with us in all good and beautiful things, but let us be careful how we take his name in vain. It is a gift of grace for one to be a great artist, but it is still better to be a good Christian.” Felix, she felt, would never have named the theatre and the church together before her, and she was glad of that.

“Now you have laid yourself out against mamma!” said Felix, laughing.

“That was very far from my thoughts!”

“Don’t trouble yourself about that. You will get into her good graces again next Sunday when you go to church. Stand outside her pew, and look up to the right, for there, in the balcony-pew, is a little face which is worth looking at—the widow-baroness’s charming daughter. Here is a well-meant piece of advice, and I give it to

you:—You cannot live where you are now. Move into larger lodgings, with the stairs in good order; or, if you won't leave the singing-master, then let him live in better style. He has means enough, and you have a pretty good income. You must give a party too, an evening supper. I could give it myself, and will give it, but you can invite a few of the little dancing girls. You're a lucky fellow! but I believe, heaven help me, that you don't yet understand how to be a young man."

Peer did understand it exactly in his own way. With his full, ardent young heart, he was in love with art; she was his bride, she returned his love, and lifted his soul into gladness and sunshine. The depression which had crushed him soon evaporated, gentle eyes looked upon him, and every one met him in a friendly and cordial manner. The amber-heart, which he still wore constantly on his breast, where grandmother once had hung it, was certainly a talisman, as he thought, for he was not quite free from superstition,—a child-like faith one may call it. Every nature that has genius in it has something of this, and looks to and believes in its star.

Grandmother had shown him the power that lay in the heart, of drawing things to itself. His dream had shown him how, out from the amber-heart, there grew a tree which burst through garret and roof, and bore a thousand-fold of hearts and silver and gold; that surely betokened that in the heart, in his own warm heart, lay the might of his art, whereby he had won and still should win thousands upon thousands of hearts.

Between him and Felix there was undoubtedly a kind of sympathy, different as they were from each other. Peer assumed that the difference between them lay in this: that Felix, as the rich man's son, had grown up in temptations, and could afford to taste them and take his pleasure thus. He had, on the contrary, been more fortunately placed as a poor man's son.

Both of these two children of the house were meanwhile growing up into eminence. Felix would soon be a Kammerjunker (a court attendant) and that is the first step to being a Kammerherr, as long as one has a gold key behind. Peer, always lucky, had already in his hand, though it was invisible, the gold key of genius, which opens all the treasures of the earth, and all hearts too.

#### XIV.

It was still winter-time. The sleigh-bells jingled, and the clouds carried snow-flakes in them, but when sunbeams burst through them there was a heralding of spring. There was a fragrance and a music in the young heart that flowed out in picturesque music and found expression in words.

## A SPRING SONG.

In swath of snow the earth is lying,  
Over the sea merry skaters are flying,  
The frost-rimmed trees are specked with crow'~  
But to-morrow, to-morrow the winter-time goes /  
The sun bursts through the heavy skies,  
Spring comes riding in summer guise,<sup>3</sup>  
And the willow pulls off its woollen glove.  
Strike up, musicians, in leafy grove;  
Little birds, little birds, sing in the sky,  
Winter's gone by ! winter's gone by

o, warm is the kiss of the sun on our cheek,  
As violets and stonewort in the woodland we seek:  
'Tis as if the old forest were holding its breath,  
For now in a night each leaf wakes from death.  
The cuckoo sings! (you know its tell-tale song),  
So many years your days will be long.<sup>4</sup>  
The world is young! be thou, too, young;  
Let happy heart and merry tongue  
With spring-time lift the song on high,  
Youth's never gone by ! never gone by!

Youth's never gone by! never gone by!  
The earth lives a charmed life for aye,  
With its sun and its storm, its joy and its pain.  
So in our hearts a world has lain,  
That will not be gone, like a shooting star,  
For man is made like God afar,  
And God and Nature keep ever young.  
So teach us, Spring, the song thou'st sung,

And pipe in, little birds in the sky,—

“Youth’s never gone by! never gone by !”

“That is a complete musical painting,” said the singing-master, “and well adapted for chorus and orchestra. It is the best yet of your pieces which have sprung out of words. You certainly must learn thorough bass, although it is not your vocation to be a composer.”

Some young music friends meanwhile quickly brought out the song at a great concert, where it excited remark but led to nothing. Our young friend’s career was open before him. His greatness and importance lay not in the sympathetic tones of his voice, but in his remarkable dramatic power. This he had shown as George Brown and as Hamlet. He very much preferred the regular opera to the singing of pieces. It was contrary to his sound and natural sense, this stepping over from song to talking, and back to singing again.

“It is,” said he, “as if one came from marble steps on to wooden ones, sometimes even on to mere hen-roosts, and then again to marble. The whole poem should live and breathe in its passage through tones.”

The music of the future, which the new movement in opera is called, and of which Wagner is specially standard-bearer, received a response and strong admiration from our young friend. He found here characters so clearly marked, passages so full of thought, the entire handling characterized by forward movement, without any stand-still or recurrence of melodies. “It is surely a most unnatural thing, the introduction of arias.”

“Yes, introduction,” said the singing-master. “But how they, in the works of most of the great masters, stand prominently forth, a large part of the whole! So must and should it be. If the lyric has a home in any place, it is in the opera;” and he mentioned in Don Juan, Don Octavio’s aria, “Tears, cease your flowing.” “How like is it to a charming lake in the woods, by whose bank one rests and is filled to the brim with the music that streams through the leafy woods! I pay my respects to the profundity that lies in the new musical movement, but I do not dance with you before that golden calf. Nor is it your heart’s real meaning which you express, or else you are not yourself quite clear about it.”

“I will appear in one of Wagner’s operas,” said our young friend. “If I cannot show my meaning by the words, yet I will by my singing and acting.”

The choice fell on Lohengrin, the young mysterious knight who, in the boat drawn by swans, glides over the Scheldt to do battle for Elsa of Brabant. Who so well as he ever acted and sang the first song of the meeting, the

conversation of two hearts in the bridal chamber, and the song of farewell when the holy Grail's white dove hovers about the young knight, who came, won—and vanished? This evening was, if possible, another step forward in the artistic greatness and celebrity of our young friend, and to the singing-master it was a step forward in the recognition of the music of the future—

“Under certain conditions,” he said.

XV.

At the great yearly exhibition of paintings, Peer and Felix one day met before the portrait of a young and pretty lady, daughter of the widow-baroness, as the mother was generally called, whose salon was the rendezvous for the world of distinction and for every one of eminence in art and science. The young baroness was in her sixteenth year, an innocent, charming child. The picture was a good likeness and given with artistic skill.

“Step into the saloon here close by,” said Felix. “There stands the young beauty with her mother.”

They stood engaged in looking at a characteristic picture. It represented a field where two young married people came riding on the same horse, holding fast to one another. The chief figure meanwhile was a young monk who was looking at the two happy travelers. There was a sorrowful dreamy look in the young man's countenance; one could read in it his thought, the story of his life; an aim missed, great happiness lost! human happiness in human love he had not won.

The elder baroness saw Felix, who respectfully greeted her and the beautiful daughter. Peer showed the same customary politeness. The widow-baroness knew him immediately from having seen him on the stage, and after speaking to Felix she said some friendly, obliging words to Peer as she pressed his hand.

“I and my daughter belong to your admirers.”

What perfect beauty seemed to possess the young girl at this moment! She looked with her gentle, clear eyes almost gratefully upon him.

“I see in my house,” continued the widow-baroness, “very many of the most distinguished artists. We common people stand in need of a spiritual airing. You will be heartily welcome. Our young diplomat,” she pointed to Felix, “will show you the way the first time, and afterward I hope that you will find the way yourself.”

She smiled on him. The young girl reached out her hand naturally and cordially, as if they had long known each



other. Later in the autumn, one cold, sleety evening, the two young men went as they had been invited. It was weather for driving and not walking in for the rich man's son, and for the first singer on the stage.

Nevertheless they walked, well wrapped up, with galoshes on their feet and rough caps on their heads.

It was like a complete fairy scene to come out from the raw air into the apartment displaying such luxury and good taste. In the vestibule, before the carpeted stairs, there was a great display of flowers among bushes and fan-palms. A little fountain splashed in the basin, which was surrounded by tall callas. The great salon was beautifully lighted, and a great part of the company had already gathered. Soon there was almost a crowd. People trod on silk trains and laces; there was a hum round about of conversation's sonorous mosaic, which, on the whole, was the least worth while of all the splendor there.

Had Peer been a vain fellow, which he was not, he could have imagined that it was a feast made for him, so cordial was the reception which he met from the mistress of the house and the beaming daughter. Young ladies and old, yes, and gentlemen with them, said most agreeable things to him.

There was music. A young author read a well-written poem. There was singing, and true delicacy was shown in that no one urged our young and honored singer to make the whole affair most complete. The lady of the house was the observing hostess, full of spirits and full of hospitality in that elegant salon.

It was his introduction into the great world, and our young friend was soon here also one of the select ones in the choice family circle. The singing-master shook his head and smiled.

"How young thou art, dear friend," said he, "that thou canst enjoy going among these people. They can be good enough in and for themselves; but they look down on us plain citizens. For some of them it is only a piece of vanity, an amusement, and for others a sort of mark of exclusive culture when they receive into their circle artists and the lions of the day. These belong in the salon much as the flowers in a vase, they wither and then they are thrown away."

"How harsh and unjust," said Peer. "You do not know these people, and will not know them."

"No," answered the singing-master. "I am not at home with them, nor are you either, and this they all remember and know. They caress you and look at you just as they pat and look at a race-horse that is to win a wager. You belong to another race than they. They will let you go when you are no longer in the fashion. Do you not understand that? You are not proud enough. You are vain, and you show that by seeking these people."

“How very differently you would talk and judge,” said Peer, “if you knew the widow-baroness and a few of my friends there.”

“I shall not get to knowing them,” said the singing-master.

“When is the engagement to come out?” asked Felix one day. “Is it the mother or the daughter?” and he laughed. “Don’t take the daughter, for then you’ll have all the young nobility against you, and I too shall be your enemy, and the fiercest one.”

“What do you mean?” asked Peer.

“You are the most favored one. You can go out and in at all hours. You’ll get the cash along with the mother, and belong to a good family.”

“Stop your joking,” said Peer. “There is nothing amusing to me in what you say.”

“No indeed, there is no fun at all in it,” said Felix. “It is a most serious matter, for you’ll not let her grace sit and weep and be a double widow.”

“Leave the baroness out of your talk,” said Peer. “Make yourself merry over me if you want to, but over me alone, and I will answer you.”

“No one will believe that it is a love match on your side,” continued Felix. “She is a little outside of the line of beauty—one does not live on spirit alone!”

“I gave you credit for more refinement and good sense,” said Peer, “than would let you talk thus of a lady you ought to esteem, and whose house you visit, and I won’t talk of this longer.”

“What are you going to do about it?” asked Felix. “Will you fight?”

“I know that you have learned that, and I have not, but I can learn,” and he left Felix.

A day or two afterward the two children of the house met again, the son from the first floor and the son from the garret. Felix talked to Peer as if no quarrel had risen between them. He answered courteously, but curtly too.

“What is the matter now!” said Felix. “We two were a little irritable lately, but one may have his joke without

being flayed for it; so let us forget and forgive.”

“Can you forgive yourself the manner in which you spoke of a lady to whom we both owe great respect?”

“I spoke very frankly!” said Felix. “In fine society one may talk with a razor-edge, but that is not thought an ill thing. It is the salt for the tasteless every-day fish dinner, as the poet calls it. We are all just a little wicked. You can also let a drop fall, my friend; a little drop of innocence which makes one smart.”

So they were soon seen arm in arm. Felix well knew that more than one pretty young lady who would otherwise have passed him by without seeing him, now noticed him since he was walking with the “Ideal of the Stage.”

Lamp-light always casts a glamour over the theatre’s hero and lover. It still shines about him when he shows himself on the street, in day-light, but is generally rather extinguished then. Most of the artists of the stage are like swans; one should see them in their element, not on the paving stones or the public promenade. There are exceptions, however, and to these belonged our young friend. His appearance apart from the stage never disturbed the conception one had of him as George Brown, or Hamlet, or Lohengrin. It was the form associated thus with poetry or music that many a young heart made to be the same with the man himself and exalted into the ideal. He knew that it was thus, and found a kind of pleasure in it. He was happy in his art, and in the means he possessed of exercising it, yet there would come a shadow over the joyous young face, and from the piano sounded the melody with the words:—

Vanishing—vanishing all!

Thy youth, thy hope, and thy friend.

Like the wind, they heed not thy call,

They vanish, nor turn back again.

“How mournful!” said the widow-baroness. “You have happiness in full measure. I know no one who is so happy as you.”

“Call no one happy before he is in his grave, the wise Solon said,” replied he, and smiled through his seriousness; “it were a wrong, a sin, if I were not thankful and glad of heart. I am thus. I am thankful for what is intrusted to me, but I myself set a different value on this from what others do. It is a beautiful piece of fireworks which shoots off and then is all out. The actor’s work thus vanishes out of knowledge.

The everlasting shining stars may be forgotten for the meteors of a moment, but when these are extinguished,

there is no living trace of them except by the old signs. A new generation does not know and cannot picture to itself those who delighted their fathers from the stage youth, perhaps, applauds splendor and brass as delightedly and as loudly as the old folks once did splendor and true gold. Far more fortunately placed than the scenic artist are the poet, the sculptor, the painter and the composer.

They may in the struggle of life experience hard fortune and miss the merited appreciation, while those who exhibit their works, as the actor and the musician, live in luxury and proud state. Let the many stand and gaze at the bright-colored cloud and forget the sun, yet the cloud vanishes, the sun shines and beams for new generations.”

He sat at the piano and improvised with a richness of thought and a power such as he never before had shown.

“Wondreffully beautiful!” broke in the widow-baroness. “’Twas as if I heard the story of a whole life-time. You gave your heart’s canticle in the music.”

“I thought of the Thousand and one Nights,” said the young girl, “of the lamp of fortune, of Aladdin,” and she looked with pure, dewy eyes upon him.

“Aladdin!” he repeated.

This evening was the turning-point in his life. A new section surely began.

What was befalling him this flitting year? His fresh color forsook his cheeks; his eyes shone far more clearly than before. He passed sleepless nights, but not in wild orgies, in revels and rioting, as so many great artists. He became less talkative, but more cheerful.

“What is it that fills you so?” said his friend the singing master. “You do not confide all to me!”

“I think how fortunate I am!” he replied —“I think of the poor boy! I think of—Aladdin.”

XVI.

Measured by the expectations of a poor-born child, Peer now led a prosperous, agreeable life. He was so well to do that, as Felix once said, he could give a good party to his friends. He thought of it, and thought of his two earliest friends, his mother and grandmother. For them and himself he provided a festival.

It was charming spring weather; the two old people must drive with him out of town and see a little country place which the singing-master had lately bought. As he was about seating himself in the carriage, there came

a woman, humbly clad, about thirty years old; she had a begging paper recommending her signed by Madam Court.

“Don’t you know me?” said she. “Little Curly-head, they used to call me. The curls are gone, there is so much that is gone, but there are still good people left. We two have appeared together in the ballet. You have become better off than I. You have become a great man. I am now separated from two husbands and no longer at the theatre.”

Her “paper” begged that she might come to own a sewing-machine.

“In what ballet have we two performed together?” asked Peer.

“In the “Tyrant of Padua,”” she replied. “We were two pages, in blue velvet and feathered cap. Do you not remember little Malle Knallerup? I walked just behind you in the procession.”

“And stepped on the side of my foot!” said Peer, laughing.

“Did I?” said she. “Then I took too long a step. But you have gone far ahead of me. You have understood how to use your legs in your head,” and she looked with her melancholy face coquettishly and with a simper at him, quite sure she had passed quite a witty compliment. Peer was a generous fellow. She should have the sewing-machine, he promised. Little Malle had indeed been one of those who especially drove him out of the ballet into a more fortunate career.

He stopped soon outside the merchant’s house, and stepped up-stairs to his mother and grandmother. They were in their best clothes, and had accidentally a visit from Madam Court, who was at once invited to join them, whereupon she had a sore struggle with herself, which ended in her sending a messenger to Herr Court to inform him that she had accepted the invitation.

“Peer gets all the fine salutations,” said she.

“How stylishly we are driving!” said mother; “And in such a roomy, great carriage,” said grandmother.

Near the town, close by the royal park, stood a little cozy house, surrounded by vines and roses, hazels and fruit-trees. Here the carriage stopped. This was the country-seat. They were received by an old woman, well known to mother and grandmother; she had often helped them in their washing and ironing.

The garden was visited, and they went over the house. There was one specially charming thing—a little glass house, with beautiful flowers in it. It was connected with the sitting-room. There was a sliding door in the wall.

“That is just like a coulisse,” said Madam Court. “It moves by hand; and one can sit here just as in a bird-cage, with chickweed all about. It is called a winter-garden.”

The sleeping-chamber was also very delightful after its kind. Long, close curtains at the windows, soft carpets, and two armchairs, so commodious that mother and grandmother must needs try them.

“One would get very lazy sitting in them,” said mother.

“One loses his weight,” said Madam Court. “Ah! here you two music people can swim easily enough through the seas of theatrical labor. I have known what they are. Ay, believe me, I can still dream of making battlements, and Court makes battlement’s at my side. Is it not charming—‘two souls and one thought.’”

“There is fresher air here, and more room, than in the two small rooms up in the garret,” said Peer with beaming eyes.

“That there is,” said mother. “Still home is so good. There did I bear thee, my sweet boy, and lived with thy father.”

“It is better here,” said grandmother. “Here there are all the conveniences of a rich man’s place. I do not grudge you and that noble man the singing-master this home of peace.”

“Then I do not grudge it to you, grandmother, and you, dear blessed mother. You two shall always live here, and not, as in town, go up so many steps, and be in such narrow and close quarters. You shall have a servant to help you, and see me as often as in town. Are you glad at this? Are you content with it?”

“What is all this the boy stands here and says!” said mother.

“The house, the garden, all are thine, mother, and thine, grandmother. It is for this I have labored to lay up money. My friend the singing-master has faithfully helped me by getting it ready.”

“What is all this you are saying, child?” burst forth the mother. “Will you give us a gentleman’s seat? My dearest boy, thou wouldst do it if thou couldst.”

“It is all true,” said he. “The house is thine and grandmother’s.” He kissed them both; they burst into tears, and Madam Court shed quite as many.

“It is the happiest moment of my life!” exclaimed Peer, as he embraced them all.

And now they had to see everything all over again, since it was their own. In place of their five or six plants in pots out on their roof, they now had this beautiful little conservatory. Instead of a little closet they had here a great roomy pantry, and the kitchen itself was a complete little warm chamber. The chimney had an oven and cooking-stove; it looked like a great shining box iron, said mother.

“Now you two have at last a chimney corner just like me!” said Madam Court. “It is royal here. You have got all that man can get on this earth, and you too, my own courted friend.”

“Not all!” said Peer.

“To be sure the little wife comes!” said Madam Court. “I have her already for you. I have her in my feeling! but I shall keep my mouth shut. Thou noble man! Is it not like a ballet, all this?” She laughed with tears in her eyes, and so did mother and grandmother.

XVII.

To write the text and music for an opera, and be himself the interpreter of his own work on the stage, this was his great aim. Our young friend had a talent in common with Wagner, in that he could himself construct the dramatic poem; but had he, like him, the fulness of musical power so that he could fashion a musical work of any significance?

Courage and doubt alternated in him. He could not dismiss this constant thought from his mind. A year and a day since had it shone forth as a picture of fancy; now it was a possibility, an end in his life. Many free fancies were welcomed at the piano as birds of passage from that country of Perhaps. The little romances, the characteristic spring song gave promise of the still undiscovered land of tone. The widow-baroness saw in them the sign of promise, as Columbus saw it in the fresh green weed which the currents of the sea bore toward him before he saw the land itself on the horizon.

Land was there! The child of fortune should reach it. A word thrown out was the seed of thought. She, the young, pretty, innocent girl spoke the word—Aladdin.

A fortune-child like Aladdin was our young friend. This was the light that broke into him. With this light he read and re-read the beautiful oriental story; soon it took dramatic form: scene after scene grew into words and music, and the more it grew the richer came the music thoughts; at the close of the work it was as if the well of tone were now for the first time pierced, and all the abundant fresh water gushed forth. He composed his work anew, and in stronger form, months afterward, arose the opera Aladdin.

No one knew of this work; no one had heard any measures at all of it, not even the most sympathetic of all his friends, the singing-master. No one at the theatre, when of an evening the young singer with his voice and his remarkable playing entranced the public, had a thought that the young man who seemed so to live and breathe in his rôle, lived far more intensely, ay, for hours afterward, lost himself in a mighty work of music that flowed forth from his own soul.

The singing-master had not heard a bar of the opera Aladdin before it was laid upon his table for examination, complete in notes and text. What judgment would be passed? Assuredly a strong and just one. The young composer passed from highest hope to the thought that the whole thing was only a self-delusion.

Two days passed by, and not a word was interchanged about this important matter. At length the singing-master stood before him with the score in his hands, that now he knew. There was a peculiar seriousness spread over his face that would not let his mind be guessed.

“I had not expected this,” said he. “I had not believed it of you. Indeed, I am not yet sure of my judgment: I dare not express it. Here and there there are faults in the instrumentation, faults that can easily be corrected. There are single things, bold and novel, that one must hear under fair conditions. As there is with Wagner a working over of Carl Maria Weber, so there is noticeable in you a breath of Haydn. That which is new in what you have given is still somewhat far off from me, and you yourself are too near for me to give an exact judgment. I would rather not judge. I would embrace you!” he burst out with a rush of gladness. “How came you to do this!” and he pressed him in his arms. “Happy man!”

There was soon a rumor through the town, in the newspapers and in society gossip, of the new opera by the young singer, whom all the town was flattering.



“He’s a poor tailor who could not put together a child’s trousers out of the scraps left over on his board,” said one and another.

“Write the text, compose it, and sing it himself!” was also said. “That is a three-storied genius. But he really was born still higher—in a garret.”

“There are two at it, he and the singing-master,” they said. “Now they’ll begin to beat the signal-trumpet of the mutual admiration society.”

The opera was given out for study. Those who took part would not give any opinion. “It shall not be said that it is judged from the theatre,” said they; and almost all put on a serious face that did not let any expectation of good show itself.

“There are a good many horns in the piece,” said a young man who played that instrument, and also composed. “Well if he doesn’t run a horn into himself!”

“It has genius, it is sparkling, full of melody and character”—that also was said.

“Tomorrow at this time,” said Peer, “the scaffold will be raised. The judgment is, perhaps, already passed.”

“Some say that it is a masterpiece,” said the singing-master; “others, that it is a mere patchwork.”

“And wherein lies truth?”

“Truth!” said the singing-master. “Pray show me. Look at that star yonder. Tell me exactly where its place is. Shut one eye. Do you see it? Now look at it with the other only. The star has shifted its place. When each eye in the same person sees so differently, how variously must the great multitude see!”

“Happen what may,” said our young friend, “I must know my place in the world, understand what I can and must put forth, or give up.”

The evening came,—the evening of the representation. A popular artist was to be exalted to a higher place, or plunged down in his gigantic, proud effort. A shot or a drop! The matter concerned the whole city. People stood all night in the street before the ticket-office to secure places. The house was crammed frill; the ladies came with great bouquets. Would they carry them home again, or cast them at the victor’s feet?

The widow-baroness and the young, beautiful daughter sat in a box above the orchestra. There was a stir in the audience, a murmuring, a movement that stopped at once as the leader of the orchestra took his place and the overture began.

Who does not remember Henselt's piece—"Si l'oiseau j'étais," that is like a twittering of birds? This was something akin; merry playing children, happy child-voices; the cuckoo gave its note with them, the thrush struck in. It was the lay and carol of innocent childhood, the mind of Aladdin. Then there rolled in upon it a thunderstorm; Nouraddin displayed his power; a flash of lightning rent the rocks; gentle beckoning tones followed, a sound from the enchanted grotto where the lamp shone in the petrified cavern, while the wings of mighty spirits brooded over it.

Now there sounded forth, in the notes of a bugle, a psalm so gentle and soft as if it came from the mouth of a child; a single horn was heard and then another, more and more were blended in the same tones, and rose in fullness and power as if they were the trumpets of the judgment day. The lamp was in Aladdin's hand, and there swelled forth a sea of melody and majesty as if the ruler of spirits and master of music held sway.

The curtain rolled up in a storm of applause which sounded like a fanfare under the conductor's baton. A grown-up boy played there, so big and yet so simple,—it was Aladdin who frolicked among the other boys. Grandmother would at once have said:—

"That is Peer, as he played and jumped about between the stove and the chest of drawers at home in the garret. He is not a year older in his soul!"

With what faith and earnest prayer he sang the prayer Nouraddin bade him offer before he stepped down into the crevice to obtain the lamp. Was it the pure religious melody, or the innocence with which he sung, that drew all hearts after him? The applause was unbounded.

It would have been a profane thing to have repeated the song. It was called for, but it was not given. The curtain fell,—the first act was ended. Every critic was speechless; people were overcome with gladness—they could only speak out their gratitude. A few chords from the orchestra, and the curtain rose. The strains of music, as in Gluck's "Armida," and Mozart's "Magic Flute," arrested the attention of each; as the scene was disclosed where Aladdin stood in the wonderful garden, a soft subdued music sounded from flowers and stones, from springs and deep caverns, different melodies blending in one great harmony. A susurrus of spirits

was heard in the chorus; it was now far off, now near, swelling in might and then dying away. Borne upon this unison was the monologue of Aladdin; what one indeed calls a great aria, but so entirely in keeping with character and situation that it was a necessary dramatic part of the whole. The resonant, sympathetic voice, the intense music of the heart subdued all listeners, and seized them with a rapture that could not rise higher, when he reached forth for the lamp that was fanned by the song of the spirits.

Bouquets rained down from all sides, a carpet of living flowers was spread out before his feet.

What a moment of life for the young artist,—the highest, the greatest! A mightier one could never again be granted him, he felt. A wreath of laurel glanced upon his breast and fell down before him. He had seen from whose hand it came. He saw the young girl in the box nearest the stage, the young baroness, rising like a Genius of Beauty, singing a pæan over his triumph.

A fire rushed through him, his heart swelled as never before, he bowed, took the wreath, pressed it against his heart, and at the same moment fell backward.—Fainted? dead?—What was it?—The curtain fell.

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“Dead!” ran the word through the house. Dead in the moment of triumph, like Sophocles at the Olympian Games, like Thorwaldsen in the theatre during Beethoven’s symphony. An artery in his heart had burst, and as by a flash of lightning his day here was ended, ended without pain, ended in an earthly jubilee, in the fullfilment of his mission on earth. Lucky Peer! More fortunate than millions!

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