
A Pilgrimage to Beethoven

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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[20]

Prefatory Note

Shortly after the modest funeral of my friend R..., lately deceased in Paris, I had set to work and written the brief history of his sufferings in this glittering metropolis, in accordance with the dead man's wish, when among his papers—from which I propose to select a few complete articles in the sequel—there came into my hands the fond narration of his journey to Vienna and visit to Beethoven. There I found a wonderful agreement with what I already had jotted down. This decided me to print that fragment of his journal in front of my own account of his mournful end, since it deals with an earlier period of his life, and also is likely to wake a little prior interest in my departed friend.

[21]

A Pilgrimage to Beethoven

(01)

WANT-AND-CARE, thou patron-goddess of the German musician, unless he happens to be Kapellmeister to a Court-theatre or the like, (02) —Want-and-care, thine be the name first lauded even in this reminiscence from my life! Ay, let me sing of thee, thou staunch companion of my life-time! Faithful hast thou been to me, and never left me; the smiles of Inconstance thou hast ever warded off, and shielded me from Fortune's scorching rays! In deepest shadow hast thou ever cloaked from me the empty baubles of this earth: have thanks for thy unwearying attachment! Yet, might it so be, prithee some day seek another favourite; for, purely out of curiosity, I fain would learn for once how life might fare *without* thee. At least, I beg thee, plague especially our political dreamers, the madmen who are breathless to [22] unite our Germany beneath *one* sceptre:—think on't, there then would be but one Court-theatre, one solitary Kapellmeister's post! What would become of my prospects, my only hopes; which, even as it is, but hover dim and shadowy before me—e'en now when German royal theatres exist in plenty? (03) But I perceive I am turning blasphemous. Forgive, my patron-goddess, the dastard wish just uttered! Thou know'st my heart, and how entirely I am thine, and shall remain thine, were there a thousand royal theatres in Germany. (04) Amen!

Without this daily prayer of mine I begin nothing, and therefore not the story of my pilgrimage to Beethoven!

In case this weighty document should get published after my death, however, I further deem needful to say who I am; without which information much therein might not be understood. Know then, world and testament-executor!

A middle-sized town of middle Germany is my birthplace. I'm not quite certain what I really was intended for; I only remember that one night I for the first time heard a symphony of Beethoven's performed, that it set me in a fever, I fell ill, and on my recovery had become a musician. This circumstance may haply account for the fact that, though in time I also made acquaintance with other beautiful music, I yet have loved, have honoured, worshipped Beethoven before all else. Henceforth I knew no other pleasure, than to plunge so deep into his genius that at last I fancied myself become a portion thereof; and as this tiniest portion, I began to respect myself, to come by higher thoughts and views — in brief, to develop into what sober people call an idiot. My madness, however, was of very good-humoured sort, and did no harm to any man; the bread [23] I ate, in this condition, was very dry, and the liquid that I drank most watery; for lesson-giving yields but poor returns, with us, O honoured world and testament-executor! (05)

Thus I lived for some time in my garret, till it occurred to me one day that the man whose creations I revered above all else was still *alive*. It passed my understanding, how I had never thought of that before. It had never struck me that Beethoven could exist, could be eating bread and breathing air, like one of us; but this Beethoven was living in Vienna for all that, and he too was a poor German musician!

My peace of mind was gone. My every thought became one wish: *to see Beethoven!* No Mussulman more devoutly longed to journey to the grave of his Prophet, than I to the lodging where Beethoven dwelt.

But how to set about the execution of my project? To Vienna was a long, long journey, and needed money; whilst I, poor devil, scarce earned enough to stave off hunger! So I must think of some exceptional means of finding the needful travelling-money. A few pianoforte-sonatas, which I had composed on the master's model, I carried to the publisher; in

a word or two the man made clear to me that I was a fool with my sonatas. He gave me the advice, however, that if I wanted to some day earn a dollar or so by my compositions, I should begin by making myself a little renommée by galops and pot-pourris.—I shuddered; but my yearning to see Beethoven gained the victory; I composed galops and pot-pourris, but for very shame I could never bring myself to cast one glance on Beethoven in all that time, for fear it should defile him.

To my misfortune, however, these earliest sacrifices of my innocence did not even bring me pay, for my publisher explained that I first must earn myself a little name. I shuddered again, and fell into despair. That despair brought forth some capital galops. I actually touched money for them, and at last believed I had amassed enough to be able to execute my plan. But two years [24] had elapsed, and all the time I feared that Beethoven might die before I had made my name by galops and pot-pourris. Thank God! he had survived the glitter of my name!—Saint Beethoven, forgive me that renommée; 'twas earned that I might see thee!

Joy! my goal was in sight. Who happier than I? I might strap my bundle and set out for Beethoven at once. A holy awe possessed me when I passed outside the gate and turned my footsteps southwards. Gladly would I have taken a seat in the diligence, not because I feared footsoreness—(what hardships would I not have cheerfully endured for such a goal!)—but since I should thus have reached Beethoven sooner. I had done too little for my fame as galop-composer, however, to be able to pay carriage-fare. So I bore all toils, and thought myself lucky to have got so far that they could take me to my goal. O what I pictured, what I dreamed! No lover, after years of separation, could be more happy at returning to his youthful love.

And so I came to fair Bohemia, the land of harpists and wayside singers. In a little town I found a troop of strolling musicians; they formed a tiny orchestra, composed of a 'cello, two violins, two horns, a clarinet and a flute; moreover there was a woman who played the harp, and two with lovely voices. They played dances and sang songs; folk gave them money and they journeyed on. In a beautiful shady place beside the highway I found them again; they had camped on the grass, and were taking their meal. I introduced myself by saying that I too was a travelling musician, and we soon became friends. As they played dance-music, I bashfully asked if they knew my galops also? God bless them! they had never heard of my galops. O what good news for me!

I inquired whether they played any other music than dances.

"To be sure," they answered, "but only for ourselves; not for gentlefolk."

They unpacked their sheets, and I caught sight of the [25] grand Septuor of Beethoven; astonished, I asked if they played that too?

"Why not?"—replied the eldest,—"Joseph has hurt his hand, and can't play the second violin to-day, or we'd be delighted to give it at once."

Beside myself, I snatched up Joseph's violin, promised to do my best to replace him, and we began the Septuor.

O rapture! Here on the slope of a Bohemian highway, in open air, Beethoven's Septuor played by dance-musicians with a purity, a precision, and a depth of feeling too seldom found among the highest virtuosi!—Great Beethoven, we brought thee a worthy offering.

We had just got to the Finale, when—the road bending up at this spot toward the hills—an elegant travelling-carriage drew slowly and noiselessly near, and stopped at last close by us. A marvellously tall and marvellously blond young man lay stretched full-length in the carriage; he listened to our music with tolerable attention, drew out a pocket-book, and made a few notes. Then he let drop a gold coin from the carriage, and drove away with a few words of English to his lackey; whence it dawned on me that he must be an Englishman.

This incident quite put us out; luckily we had finished our performance of the Septuor. I embraced my friends, and wanted to accompany them; but they told me they must leave the

high road here and strike across the fields, to get home to their native village for a while. Had it not been Beethoven himself who was awaiting me, I certainly would have kept them company. As it was, we bade each other a tender good-bye, and parted. Later it occurred to me that no one had picked up the Englishman's coin.—

Upon entering the nearest inn, to fortify my body, I found the Englishman seated at an ample meal. He eyed me up and down, and at last addressed me in passable German.

"Where are your colleagues?" he asked.

"Gone home," I replied.

"Just take out your violin, and play me something more," he continued, "here's money."

[26]

That annoyed me; I told him I neither played for money, nor had I any violin, and briefly explained how I had fallen in with those musicians.

"They were good musicians," put in the Englishman, "and the Symphony of Beethoven was very good, too."

Struck by this remark, I asked him if he practised music?

"Yes," he answered, "twice a week I play the flute, on Thursdays the French horn, and of a Sunday I compose."

That was a good deal, enough to astound me. In all my life I had never heard tell of travelling English musicians; I concluded that they must do very well, if they could afford to make their tours in such splendid equipages. I asked if he was a musician by profession?

For long I got no answer; finally he drawled out, that he had plenty of money.

My mistake was obvious to me now, for my question had plainly offended him. At a loss what to say, I devoured my simple meal in silence.

After another long inspection of me, the Englishman commenced afresh.

"Do you know Beethoven?"

I replied that I had never yet been in Vienna, but was on my way there to fulfil my dearest wish, to see the worshipped master.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From L...."

"That's not so far! I've come from England, and also with the intention of seeing Beethoven. We both will make his acquaintance; he's a very famous composer."

What a wonderful coincidence!—I thought to myself. Mighty master, what divers kinds thou drawest to thee! On foot and on wheels they make their journey.—My Englishman interested me; but I avow I little envied him his equipage. To me it seemed as though my weary pilgrimage afoot were holier and more devout, and that its goal must bless me more than this proud gentleman who drove there in full state.

Then the postilion blew his horn; the Englishman drove [27] off, shouting back to me that he would see Beethoven before I did.

I scarce had trudged a few miles in his wake, when unexpectedly I encountered him again. It was on the high road. A wheel of his carriage had broken down; but in majestic ease he sat inside, with his valet mounted up behind him, notwithstanding that the vehicle was all askant. I learnt that they were waiting for the return of the postilion, who had run off to a somewhat distant village to fetch a blacksmith. As they had already been waiting a good long time, and as the valet spoke nothing but English, I decided to set off for the village myself, to hurry up smith and postilion. In fact I found the latter in a tavern, where spirits were relieving him of any particular care about the Englishman; however, I soon brought him back with the smith to the injured carriage. The damage was mended; the Englishman promised to announce me to Beethoven, and—drove away.

Judge my surprise, when I overtook him again on the high road next day! This time, however, no wheels were broken; drawn up in the middle of the road, he was tranquilly

reading a book, and seemed quite pleased to see me coming.

"I've been waiting a good many hours for you," he said, "as it occurred to me on this very spot that I did wrong in not inviting you to drive with me to Beethoven. Riding is much better than walking. Come into the carriage."

I was astonished again. For a moment I really hesitated whether I ought not to accept his invitation; but I soon remembered the vow I had made the previous day when I saw the Englishman rolling off; I had sworn, in any circumstances to pursue my pilgrimage on foot. I told him this openly. It was now the Englishman's turn to be astonished; he could not comprehend me. He repeated his offer, saying that he had already waited many hours expressly for me, notwithstanding his having been very much delayed at his sleeping-quarters through the time consumed in thoroughly repairing the broken wheel. I remained firm, and he drove off, wondering.

[28]

Candidly, I had a secret dislike of him; for I was falling prey to a vague foreboding that this Englishman would cause me serious trouble. Moreover his reverence for Beethoven, and his proposal to make his acquaintance, to me seemed more the idle whim of a wealthy coxcomb than the deep inner need of an enthusiastic soul. Therefore I preferred to avoid him, lest his company might desecrate my pious wish.

But, as if my destiny meant to school me for the dangerous association with this gentleman into which I was yet to fall, I met him again on the evening of that same day, halting before an inn, and, as it seemed, still waiting for me. For he sat with his back to the horses, looking down the road by which I came.

"Sir," he began, "I again have waited very many hours for you. Will you drive with me to Beethoven?"

This time my astonishment was mingled with a secret terror. I could only explain this striking obstinacy in the attempt to serve me, on the supposition that the Englishman, having noticed my growing antipathy for him, was bent on thrusting himself upon me for my destruction. With undisguised annoyance, I once more declined his offer. Then he insolently cried:

"Goddam, you little value Beethoven. *I shall soon see him.*" Post haste he flew away.—

And that was really the last time I was to meet this islander on my still lengthy road to Vienna. At last I trod Vienna's streets; the end of my pilgrimage was reached. With what feelings I entered this Mecca of my faith! All the toil and hardships of my weary journey were forgotten; I was at the goal, within the walls that circled Beethoven.

I was too deeply moved, to be able to think of carrying out my aim at once. True, the first thing I did was to inquire for Beethoven's dwelling, but merely in order to lodge myself close by. Almost opposite the house in which the master lived there happened to be a not too stylish hostelry; I engaged a little room on its fifth floor, [29] and there began preparing myself for the greatest event of my life, a visit to Beethoven.

After having rested two days, fasting and praying, but never casting another look on the city, I plucked up heart to leave my inn and march straight across to the house of marvels. I was told Herr Beethoven was not at home. That suited me quite well; for it gave me time to collect myself afresh. But when four times more throughout the day the same reply was given me, and with a certain increasing emphasis, I held that day for an unlucky one, and abandoned my visit in gloom.

As I was strolling back to the inn, my Englishman waved his hand to me from a first-floor window, with a fair amount of affability.

"Have you seen Beethoven?" he shouted.

"Not yet; he wasn't in," I answered, wondering at our fresh encounter. The Englishman met me on the stairs, and with remarkable friendliness insisted upon my entering his apartment.

"*Mein Herr*," he said, "I have seen you go to Beethoven's house five times to-day. I have been here a good many days, and have taken up my quarters in this villainous hotel so as to be near Beethoven. Believe me, it is most difficult to get a word with him; the gentleman is full of crotchets. At first I went six times a-day to his house, and each time was turned away. Now I get up very early, and sit at my window till late in the evening, to see when Beethoven goes out. But the gentleman seems *never* to go out."

"So you think Beethoven was at home to-day, as well, and had me sent away?" I cried aghast.

"Exactly; you and I have each been dismissed. And to me it is very annoying, for I didn't come here to make Vienna's acquaintance, but Beethoven's."

That was very sad news for me. Nevertheless I tried my luck again on the following day; but once more in vain,—the gates of heaven were closed against me.

My Englishman, who kept constant watch on my fruitless attempts from his window, had now gained positive [30] information that Beethoven's apartments did not face the street. He was very irritating, but unboundedly persevering. My patience, on the contrary, was wellnigh exhausted, for I had more reason than he; a week had gradually slipped by, without my reaching my goal, and the returns from my galops allowed a by no means lengthy stay in Vienna. Little by little I began to despair.

I poured my griefs into my landlord's ear. He smiled, and promised to tell me the cause of my bad fortune if I would undertake not to betray it to the Englishman. Suspecting my unlucky star, I took the stipulated vow.

"You see," said the worthy host, "quite a number of Englishmen come here, to lie in wait for Herr von Beethoven. This annoys Herr von Beethoven very much, and he is so enraged by the push of these gentry that he has made it clean impossible for any stranger to gain admittance to him. He's a singular gentleman, and one must forgive him. But it's very good business for my inn, which is generally packed with English, whom the difficulty of getting a word with Herr Beethoven compels to be my guests for longer than they otherwise would. However, as you promise not to scare away my customers, I hope to find a means of smuggling you to Herr Beethoven."

This was very edifying; I could not reach my goal because, poor devil, I was taken for an Englishman. So ho! my fears were verified; the Englishman was my perdition! At first I thought of quitting the inn, since it was certain that everyone who lodged there was considered an Englishman at Beethoven's house, and for that reason I also was under the ban. However, the landlord's promise, to find me an opportunity of seeing and speaking with Beethoven, held me back. Meanwhile the Englishman, whom I now detested from the bottom of my heart, had been practising all kinds of intrigues and bribery, yet all without result.

Thus several fruitless days slipped by again, while the revenue from my galops was visibly dwindling, when at last the landlord confided to me that I could not possibly miss Beethoven if I would go to a certain beer-garden, [31] which the composer was in the habit of visiting almost every day at the same hour. At like time my mentor gave me such unmistakable directions as to the master's personal appearance, that I could not fail to recognise him. My spirits revived, and I resolved not to defer my fortune to the morrow. It was impossible for me to meet Beethoven on his going out, as he always left his house by a back-door; so there remained nothing but the beer-garden.

Alas! I sought the master there in vain on that and the two succeeding days. Finally, on the fourth, as I was turning my steps towards the fateful garden at the stated hour, to my despair I noticed that the Englishman was cautiously and carefully following me at a distance. The wretch, posted at his eternal window, had not let it escape him that I went out every day at a certain time in the same direction; struck by this, and guessing that I had found some means of tracking Beethoven, he had decided to reap his profit from my supposed discovery. He told

me all this with the calmest impudence, declaring at the same time that he meant to follow wherever I went. In vain were all my efforts to deceive him and make him believe that I was only going to refresh myself in a common beer-garden, far too unfashionable to be frequented by gentlemen of his quality: he remained unshaken, and I could only curse my fate. At last I tried impoliteness, and sought to get rid of him by abuse; but, far from letting it provoke him, he contented himself with a placid smile. His fixed idea was to see Beethoven; nothing else troubled him.

And in truth I was this day, at last, to look on the face of great Beethoven for the first time. Nothing can depict my emotion, and my fury too, as, sitting by side of my gentleman, I saw a man approach whose looks and bearing completely answered the description my host had given me of the master's exterior. The long blue overcoat, the tumbled shock of grey hair; and then the features, the expression of the face,—exactly what a good portrait had long left hovering before my mental eye. There could be no mistake: at the first glance I had recognised him! With [32] short, quick steps, he passed us; awe and veneration held me chained.

Not one of my movements was lost on the Englishman; with avid eyes he watched the newcomer, who withdrew into the farthest corner of the as yet deserted garden, gave his order for wine, and remained for a while in an attitude of meditation. My throbbing heart cried out: 'Tis he! For some moments I clean forgot my neighbour, and watched with eager eye and speechless transport the man whose genius was autocrat of all my thoughts and feelings since ever I had learnt to think and feel. Involuntarily I began muttering to myself, and fell into a sort of monologue, which closed with the but too meaning words:

"Beethoven, it is thou, then, whom I see?"

Nothing escaped my dreadful neighbour, who, leaning over to me, had listened with bated breath to my aside. From the depths of my ecstasy I was startled by the words:

"Yes! this gentleman is Beethoven. Come, let us present ourselves to him at once!"

In utter alarm and irritation, I held the cursed English man back by the elbow.

"What are you doing?" I cried, "Do you want to compromise us—in this place—so entirely without regard for manners?"

"Oh!" he answered, "it's a capital opportunity; we shall not easily find a better."

With that he drew a kind of notebook from his pocket, and tried to make direct for the man in the blue overcoat. Beside myself, I clutched the idiot's coat-tails, and thundered at him, "Are you possessed with a devil?"

This scene had attracted the stranger's attention. He appeared to have formed a painful guess that he was the subject of our agitation, and, hastily emptying his glass, he rose to go. No sooner had the Englishman remarked this, than he tore himself from my grasp with such violence that he left one of his coat-tails in my hand, and threw himself across Beethoven's path. The master sought to avoid him; but the good-for-nothing stepped in front, made a superfine [33] bow in the latest English fashion, and addressed him as follows:

"I have the honour to present myself to the much renowned composer and very estimable gentleman, Herr Beethoven."

He had no need to add more, for at his very first words, Beethoven, after casting a glance at myself, had sprung on one side and vanished from the garden as quick as lightning. Nevertheless the irrepressible Briton was on the point of running after the fugitive, when I seized his remaining coat-tail in a storm of indignation. Somewhat surprised, he stopped, and bellowed at me:

"Goddam! this gentleman is worthy to be an Englishman! He's a great man, and no mistake, and I shall lose no time in making his acquaintance."

I was petrified; this ghastly adventure had crushed my last hope of seeing my heart's fondest wish e'er fulfilled.

It was manifest, in fact, that henceforth every attempt to approach Beethoven in an ordinary way had been made completely futile for me. In the utterly threadbare state of my finances I now had only to decide whether I should set out at once for home, with my labour lost, or take one final desperate step to reach my goal. The first alternative sent a shudder to the very bottom of my soul. Who, so near the doors of the highest shrine, could see them shut for ever without falling into annihilation?

Ere thus abandoning my soul's salvation, I still would venture on one forlorn hope. But *what* step, what road should I take? For long I could think of nothing coherent. Alas! my brain was paralysed; nothing presented itself to my overwrought imagination, save the memory of what I had to suffer when I held the coat-tail of that terrible Englishman in my hand. Beethoven's side-glance at my unhappy self, in this fearful catastrophe, had not escaped me; I felt what that glance had meant; he had taken me for an Englishman!

What was to be done, to lay the master's suspicion? Everything depended on letting him know that I was a [34] simple German soul, brimful of earthly poverty but over-earthly enthusiasm.

So at last I decided to pour out my heart upon paper. And this I did. I wrote; briefly narrating the history of my life, how I had become a musician, how I worshipped him, how I once had come by the wish to know him in person, how I had spent two years in making a name as galop-composer, how I had begun and ended my pilgrimage, what sufferings the Englishman had brought upon me, and what a terrible plight my present was. As my heart grew sensibly lighter with this recital of my woes, the comfortable feeling led me to a certain tone of familiarity; I wove into my letter quite frank and fairly strong reproaches of the master's unjust treatment of my wretched self. Finally I closed the letter in genuine inspiration; sparks flew before my eyes when I wrote the address: "*An Herrn Ludwig van Beethoven.*" I only stayed to breathe a silent prayer, and delivered the letter with my own hand at Beethoven's house.

Returning to my hotel in the highest spirits—great heavens! what brought the dreaded Englishman again before my eyes? From his window he had spied my latest move, as well; in my face he had read the joy of hope, and that sufficed to place me in his power once more. In effect he stopped me on the steps with the question: "Good news? When do we see Beethoven?"

"Never, never"!—I cried in despair—"You will never see Beethoven again, in all your life. Leave me, wretch, we have nothing in common!"

"We have much in common," he coolly rejoined, "where is my coat-tail, sir? Who authorised you to forcibly deprive me of it? Don't you know that you are to blame for Beethoven's behaviour to me? How could he think it *convenable* to have anything to do with a gentleman wearing only one coat-tail?"

Furious at seeing the blame thrown back upon myself, I shouted: "Sir, your coat-tail shall be restored to you; may you keep it as a shameful memento of how you insulted [35] the great Beethoven, and hurled a poor musician to his doom! Farewell; may we never meet again!"

He tried to detain and pacify me, assuring me that he had plenty more coats in the best condition; would I only tell him when Beethoven meant to receive us?—But I rushed upstairs to my fifth-floor attic; there I locked myself in, and waited for Beethoven's answer.

How can I ever describe what took place inside, *around* me, when the next hour actually brought me a scrap of music-paper, on which stood hurriedly written: "Excuse me, Herr R..., if I beg you not to call on me until tomorrow morning, as I am busy preparing a packet of music for the post to-day. To-morrow I shall expect you.—Beethoven."

My first action was to fall on my knees and thank Heaven for this exceptional mercy; my eyes grew dim with scalding tears. At last, however, my feelings found vent in the wildest joy; I sprang up, and round my tiny room I danced like a lunatic. I'm not quite sure what it

was I danced; I only remember that to my utter shame I suddenly became aware that I was whistling one of my galops to it. (06) This mortifying discovery restored me to my senses. I left my garret, the inn, and, drunk with joy I rushed into the streets of Vienna.

My God, my woes had made me clean forget that I was in Vienna! How delighted I was with the merry ways of the dwellers in this empire-city. I was in a state of exaltation, and saw everything through coloured spectacles. The somewhat shallow sensuousness of the Viennese seemed the freshness of warm life to me; their volatile and none too discriminating love of pleasure I took for frank and natural sensibility to all things beautiful. I ran my eye down the [36] five stage-posters for the day. Heavens! On one of them I saw: *Fidelio*, an opera by Beethoven.

To the theatre I must go, however shrunk the profits from my galops. As I entered the pit, the overture began. It was the revised edition of the opera, which, to the honour of the penetrating public of Vienna, had failed under its earlier title, *Leonora*. (07) I had never yet heard the opera in this its second form; judge, then, my delight at making here my first acquaintance with the glorious new! A very young maiden played the rôle of Leonora; but youthful as she was, this singer seemed already wedded to Beethoven's genius. With what a glow, what poetry, what depth of effect, did she portray this extraordinary woman! She was called *Wilhelmine Schröder*. (08) Hers is the high distinction of having set open this work of Beethoven to the German public; for that evening I saw the superficial Viennese themselves aroused to the strongest enthusiasm. For my own part, the heavens were opened to me; I was transported, and adored the genius who had led me—like Florestan—from night and fetters into light and freedom. (09)

I could not sleep that night. What I had just experienced, and what was in store for me next day, were too great and overpowering for me to calmly weave into a dream. I lay awake, building castles in the air and preparing myself for Beethoven's presence.—At last the new day dawned; impatiently I waited till the seemly hour for a morning visit;—it struck, and I set forth. The weightiest [37] event of my life stood before me: I trembled at the thought.

However, I had yet one fearful trial to pass through.

Leaning against the wall of Beethoven's house, as cool as a cucumber, my evil spirit waited for me—the Englishman!—The monster, after suborning all the world, had ended by bribing our landlord; the latter had read the open note from Beethoven before myself, and betrayed its contents to the Briton.

A cold sweat came over me at the sight; all poesy, all heavenly exaltation vanished: once more I was in *his* power.

"Come," began the caitiff, "let us introduce ourselves to Beethoven."

At first I thought of helping myself with a lie, and pretending that I was not on the road to Beethoven at all. But he cut the ground from under my feet by telling me with the greatest candour how he had got to the back of my secret, and declaring that he had no intention of leaving me till we both returned from Beethoven. I tried soft words, to move him from his purpose—in vain! I flew into a rage—in vain! At last I hoped to outwit him by swiftness of foot; like an arrow I darted up the steps, and tore at the bell like a maniac. But ere the door was opened the gentleman was by my side, tugging at the tail of my coat and saying: "You can't escape me. I've a right to your coat-tail, and shall hold on to it till we are standing before Beethoven."

Infuriated, I turned about and tried to loose myself; ay, I felt tempted to defend myself against this insolent son of Britain by deeds of violence:—then the door was opened. The old serving-maid appeared, shewed a wry face at our queer position, and made to promptly shut the door again. In my agony I shouted out my name, and protested that I had been invited by Herr Beethoven himself.

The old lady was still hesitating, for the look of the Englishman seemed to fill her with a

proper apprehension, when Beethoven himself, as luck would have it, appeared [38] at the door of his study. Seizing the moment, I stepped quickly in, and moved towards the master to tender my apologies. At like time, however, I dragged the Englishman behind me, as he still was holding me tight. He carried out his threat, and never released me till we both were standing before Beethoven. I made my bow, and stammered out my name; although, of course, he did not hear it, the master seemed to guess that it was I who had written him. He bade me enter his room; without troubling himself at Beethoven's astonished glance, my companion slipped in after me.

Here was I—in the sanctuary; and yet the hideous perplexity into which the awful Briton had plunged me, robbed me of all that sense of well-being so requisite for due enjoyment of my fortune. Nor was Beethoven's outward appearance itself at all calculated to fill one with a sense of ease. He was clad in somewhat untidy house-clothes, with a red woollen scarf wrapped round his waist; long, bushy grey hair hung in disorder from his head, and his gloomy, forbidding expression by no means tended to reassure me. We took our seats at a table strewn with pens and paper.

An uncomfortable feeling held us tongue-tied. It was only too evident that Beethoven was displeased at receiving two instead of one.

At last he began, in grating tones: "You come from L...?" I was about to reply, when he stopped me; passing me a sheet of paper and a pencil, he added: "Please write; I cannot hear."

I knew of Beethoven's deafness, and had prepared myself for it. Nevertheless it was like a stab through my heart when I heard his hoarse and broken words, "I cannot hear." To stand joyless and poor in the world; to know no uplifting but in the might of Tone, and yet to be forced to say, "I cannot hear!" That moment gave me the key to Beethoven's exterior, the deep furrows on his cheeks, the sombre dejection of his look, the set defiance of his lips—*he heard not!*

[39]

Distraught, and scarcely knowing what, I wrote down an apology, with a brief account of the circumstances that had made me appear in the Englishman's company. Meanwhile the latter sat silently and calmly contemplating Beethoven, who, as soon as he had read my lines, turned rather sharply to him and asked what he might want.

"I have the honour —" commenced the Briton.

"I don't understand you!" cried Beethoven, hastily interrupting him; "I cannot hear, nor can I speak much. Please write down what you want of me."

The Englishman placidly reflected for a moment, then drew an elaborate music-case from his pocket, and said to me: "Very good. You write: 'I beg Herr Beethoven to look through my composition; if any passage does not please him, will he have the kindness to set a cross against it.'"

I wrote down his request, word for word, in the hope of getting rid of him at last. And so it happened. After Beethoven had read, he laid the Englishman's composition on the table with a peculiar smile, nodded his head, and said, "I will send it."

With this my gentleman was mighty pleased; he rose, made an extra-superfine bow, and took his leave. I drew a deep breath:—he was gone.

Now for the first time did I feel myself within the sanctuary. Even Beethoven's features visibly brightened; he looked at me quietly for an instant, then began:

"The Briton has caused you much annoyance? Take comfort from mine; these travelling Englishmen have plagued me wellnigh out of my life. To-day they come to stare at a poor musician, to-morrow at a rare wild beast. I am truly grieved at having confounded you with them.—You wrote me that you liked my compositions. I'm glad of that, for nowadays I count but little on folk being pleased with my things."

This confidential tone soon removed my last embarrassment; a thrill of joy ran through me

at these simple words. I wrote that I certainly was not the only one [40] imbued with such glowing enthusiasm for every creation of his; that I wished nothing more ardently than to be able to secure for my father-town, for instance, the happiness of seeing him. in its midst for once; that he then would convince himself what an effect his works produced on the entire public there.

"I can quite believe," answered Beethoven, "that my compositions find more favour in Northern Germany. The Viennese annoy me often; they hear too much bad stuff each day, ever to be disposed to take an earnest thing in earnest."

I ventured to dispute this, instancing the performance of "Fidelio" I had attended on the previous evening, which the Viennese public had greeted with the most demonstrative enthusiasm.

"H'm, h'm!" muttered the master. "Fidelio! But I know the little mites are clapping their hands to-day out of pure conceit, for they fancy that in revising this opera I merely followed their own advice. So they want to pay me for my trouble, and cry bravo! 'Tis a good-natured folk, and not too learned; I had rather be with them, than with sober people.—Do you like Fidelio now?"

I described the impression made on me by last night's performance, and remarked that the whole had splendidly gained by the added pieces.

"Irk some work!" rejoined Beethoven. "I am no opera-composer; at least, I know no theatre in the world for which I should care to write another opera! Were I to make an opera after my own heart, everyone would run away from it; for it would have none of your arias, duets, trios, and all the stuff they patch up operas with to-day; and what I should set in their place no singer would sing, and no audience listen to. They all know nothing but gaudy lies, glittering nonsense, and sugared tedium. Who ever wrote a true musical drama, would be taken for a fool; and so indeed he would be, if he didn't keep such a thing to himself, but wanted to set it before these people."

[41]

"And how must one go to work," I hotly urged, "to bring such a musical drama about?"

"As Shakespeare did, when he wrote his plays," was the almost passionate answer. Then he went on: "He who has to stitch all kinds of pretty things for ladies with passable voices to get *bravi* and hand-claps, had better become a Parisian lady's-tailor, not a dramatic composer.—For my part, I never was made for such fal-lals. Oh, I know quite well that the clever ones say I am good enough at instrumental music, but should never be at home in vocal. They are perfectly right, since vocal music for them means nothing but operatic music; and from being at home in that nonsense, preserve me heaven!"

I here ventured to ask whether he really believed that anyone, after hearing his "Adelaide," would dare to deny him the most brilliant calling as a vocal composer too?

"Eh!" he replied after a little pause,—"Adelaide and the like are but trifles after all, and come seasonably enough to professional virtuosi as a fresh opportunity for letting off their fireworks. But why should not vocal music, as much as instrumental, form a grand and serious genre, and its execution meet with as much respect from the feather-brained warblers as I demand from an orchestra for one of my symphonies? (10) The human voice is not to be gainsaid. Nay, it is a far more beautiful and nobler organ of tone, than any instrument in the orchestra. Could not one employ it with just the same freedom as these? What entirely new results one would gain from such a procedure! For the very character that naturally distinguishes the voice of man from the mechanical instrument would have to be given especial prominence, and that would lead to the most manifold combinations. The instruments represent the rudimentary organs of Creation and Nature; what they express can never be clearly defined or put into words, for they reproduce the primitive feelings themselves, those feelings which issued from the chaos of the first Creation, [42] when maybe there was not as

yet one human being to take them up into his heart. 'Tis quite otherwise with the genius of the human voice; that represents the heart of man and its sharp-cut individual emotion. Its character is consequently restricted, but definite and clear. Now, let us bring these two elements together, and unite them! Let us set the wild, unfettered elemental feelings, represented by the instruments, in contact with the clear and definite emotion of the human heart, as represented by the voice of man. The advent of this second element will calm and smooth the conflict of those primal feelings, will give their waves a definite, united course; whilst the human heart itself, taking up into it those primordial feelings, will be immeasurably reinforced and widened, equipped to feel with perfect clearness its earlier indefinite presage of the Highest, transformed thereby to godlike consciousness." (11)

Here Beethoven paused for a few moments; as if exhausted. Then he continued with a gentle sigh: "To be sure, in the attempt to solve this problem one lights on many an obstacle; to let men sing, one must give them words. Yet who could frame in words *that* poesy which needs must form the basis of such a union of all elements? The poem must necessarily limp behind, for words are organs all too weak for such a task.—You soon will make acquaintance with a new composition of mine, which will remind you of what I just have touched on. It is a symphony with choruses. I will ask you to observe how hard I found it, to get over the incompetence of Poetry to render thorough aid. At last I decided upon using our Schiller's beautiful hymn 'To Joy'; in any case it is a noble and inspiring poem, but far from speaking *that* which, certainly in this connection, no verses in the world could say."

To this day I scarce can grasp my happiness at thus being helped by Beethoven himself to a full understanding [43] of his titanic Last Symphony, which then at most was finished, but known as yet to no man. I conveyed to him my fervent thanks for this rare condescension. At the same time I expressed the delightful surprise it had been to me, to hear that we might look forward to the appearance of a new great work of his composition. Tears had welled into my eyes,—I could have gone down on my knees to him.

Beethoven seemed to remark my agitation. Half mournfully, half roguishly, he looked into my face and said: "You might take my part, when my new work is discussed. Remember me: for the clever ones will think I am out of my senses; at least, that is what they will cry. But perhaps you see, Herr R., that I am not quite a madman yet, though unhappy enough to make me one.—People want me to write according to *their* ideas of what is good and beautiful; they never reflect that I, a poor deaf man, must have my very own ideas,—that it would be impossible for me to write otherwise than I feel. And that I cannot think and feel their beautiful affairs," he added in irony, "is just what makes out my misfortune!"

With that he rose, and paced the room with short, quick steps. Stirred to my inmost heart as I was, I stood up too;—I could feel myself trembling. It would have been impossible for me to pursue the conversation either by pantomimic signs or writing. I was conscious also that the point had been reached when my visit might become a burden to the master. To *write* a farewell word of heartfelt thanks, seemed too matter-of-fact; so I contented myself with seizing my hat, approaching Beethoven, and letting him read in my eyes what was passing within me.

He seemed to understand. "You are going?" he asked. "Shall you remain in Vienna awhile?"

I wrote that my journey had no other object than to gain his personal acquaintance; since he had honoured me with so unusual a reception, I was overjoyed to view my goal as reached, and should start for home again next day.

Smiling, he replied: "You wrote me, in what manner [44] you had procured the money for this journey.—You ought to stop in Vienna and write galops,—that sort of ware is much valued here."

I declared that I had done with all that, as I now knew nothing worth a similar sacrifice.

"Well, well," he said, "one never knows! Old fool that I am, I should have done better, myself, to write galops; the way I have gone, I shall always famish. A pleasant journey,"—he added—"think of me, and let that console you in all your troubles."

My eyes full of tears, I was about to withdraw, when he called to me: "Stay, we must polish off the musical Englishman! Let's see where to put the crosses!"

He snatched up the Briton's music-case, and smilingly skimmed its contents; then he carefully put it in order again, wrapped it in a sheet of paper, took a thick scoring-pen, and drew a huge cross from one end of the cover to the other. Whereupon he handed it to me with the words: "Kindly give the happy man his masterwork! He's an ass, and yet I envy him his long ears!—Farewell, dear friend, and hold me dear!"

And so he dismissed me. With staggering steps I left his chamber and the house.



At the hotel I found the Englishman's servant packing away his master's trunks in the travelling-carriage. So his goal, also, was reached; I could but admit that *he*, too, had proved his endurance. I ran up to my room, and likewise made ready to commence my homeward march on the morrow. A fit of laughter seized me when I looked at the cross on the cover of the Englishman's composition. That cross, however, was a souvenir of Beethoven, and I grudged it to the evil genius of my pilgrimage. My decision was quickly taken. I removed the cover, hunted out my galops, and clapped them in this damning shroud. To the Englishman I sent his composition wrapperless, accompanying it with a little note in which I told him [45] that Beethoven envied him and had declared he didn't know where to set a cross.

As I was leaving the inn, I saw my wretched comrade mount into his carriage.

"Good-bye," he cried. "You have done me a great service. I am glad to have made Beethoven's acquaintance.—Will you come with me to Italy?"

"What would you there?"—I asked in reply.

"I wish to know Mr. Rossini, as he is a very famous composer."

"Good luck!"—called I: "I know Beethoven, and that's enough for my lifetime!"

We parted. I cast one longing glance at Beethoven's house, and turned to the north, uplifted in heart and ennobled.

Notes

Note 01 on page 7

This imaginary story originally appeared in the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* for Nov. 19, 22 and 29, and Dec. 3, 1840, with the title "Une visite à Beethoven: épisode de la vie d'un musicien allemand." Its German original, "Eine Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven," first appeared in Nos. 181-86 of the Dresden *Abend-Zeitung*, July 30 to August 5, 1841, under the heading, "Zwei Epochen aus dem Leben eines deutschen Musikers" ("Two epochs from the life of a German musician," applying to the present article and its immediate successor) and with the additional sub-title "Aus den Papieren eines wirklich verstorbenen Musikers" ("From the papers of an actually deceased musician"). With that German version of 1841 the text in the *Gesammelte Schriften* agrees entirely, saving for two or three minute emendations of style and the omission of a tiny clause (p. 32 *inf.*) describing Beethoven as sitting "with his hands crossed over his stick" ("*die Hände über seinen Stock gelehnt*"). The prefatory note, [on the opposite page](#), also appeared in the *Abend-Zeitung* (but not in the *Gazette*), with exception of the few words between the dashes.—Tr.

Note 02 on page 7

From "unless" to "like" does not appear in the French.—Tr.

Note 03 on page 7

These two sentences are absent from the French.—Tr.

Note 04 on page 7

"Were there a thousand royal theatres in Germany" is also absent from the French, and presumably was an addition made in 1841. On the other hand, instead of the two next short paragraphs there appeared, "L'adoption de cette prière quotidienne doit vous dire assez que je suis musicien et que L'Allemagne est ma patrie."—Tr.

Note 05 on page 7

From "O honoured" to "executor," of course, is also absent from the French.—Tr.

Note 06 on page 14

In the French the last part of this sentence ran: "Je m'interrompis subitement en entendant quelqu'un qui semblait m'accompagner en sifflant l'air d'un de mes galops." This reference to supernatural presences is significant, as Richard Wagner's favourite author, in early life, was the fantastic E. A. Hoffmann. The invisible whistler of 1840 is represented in 1841 by the "around me" of a previous sentence, which does not appear in the *Gazette*.—Tr.

Note 07 on page 14

Between this and the succeeding sentence there appeared in the French: "On ne peut nier, à la vérité, que l'ouvrage n'ait beaucoup gagné à son remaniement; mais cela vient surtout de ce que l'auteur du second libretto offrit au musicien plus d'occasions de développer son brillant génie; *Fidelio* possède d'ailleurs en propre ses admirables finales et plusieurs autres morceaux d'élite. Je ne connaissais du reste que l'opéra primitif."—Tr.

[Note 08 on page 14](#)

In the French this was followed by: "Qui ne connaît aujourd'hui la réputation européenne de la cantatrice qui porte maintenant le double nom de Schröder-Devrient?"—In 1871 Frau Schröder-Devrient had been dead eleven years; her praises are constantly sung in the master's prose-works, especially at the close of *Actors and Singers* (Vol. V.).—Tr.

[Note 09 on page 14](#)

This sentence is simply represented in the French by "Pour ma part, j'étais ravi au troisième ciel."—Tr.

[Note 10 on page 16](#)

From "and its execution," to the end of the sentence, did not appear in the French.—Tr.

[Note 11 on page 17](#)

In the French the last clause of this sentence presents a slight shade of difference, perhaps due to the translator, "Alors le cœur humain s'ouvrant à ces émotions complexes, agrandi et dilaté par ces pressentiments infinis et délicieux, accueillera avec ivresse, avec conviction, cette espèce de révélation intime d'un monde surnaturel."—Tr.