

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN  
BACH**



*“Gentlemen, great news! The elder Bach has come.”*

*Life Stories for Young People*

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN  
BACH**

*Translated from the German of*

*Ludwig Ziemssen*

**by**

***George P. Upton***

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# CONTENTS

I. A FRIEND IN NEED . . . . .	1
II. IN THE WORLD . . . . .	11
III. THE FIRST STEP TO FAME . . . . .	21
IV. THE NEW LIFE. . . . .	34
V. A MUSICAL TOURNAMENT. . . . .	51
VI. LIFE AND WORK IN LEIPZIG . . . . .	64
VII. "HE SHALL STAND BEFORE KINGS" .	78
VIII. THE LAST OF EARTH. . . . .	98
APPENDIX . . . . .	103



## *Translator's Preface*

THERE is no person in musical or general history whose life can be studied by young people with more advantage, or followed in its general characteristics with more profit than Johann Sebastian Bach. The old saying that genius is only the highest capacity for work has sometimes been attributed to him. Whether he originated the saying or not, his life illustrates its truth. His industry was astonishing, whether in adverse or prosperous circumstances, though his remuneration, considering the magnitude of his achievements, now seems a beggarly pittance. He worked for the highest in his art, and always with the utmost of his ability, and consecrated his work to the divine honor. Upon all his important pieces he inscribed the letters, "S. D. G." ("Soli Deo Gloria"), "to the glory of God alone." What the simple, God-fearing, art-loving cantor of Saint Thomas accomplished, the world knows. Gounod summed it up in the declaration that if all the music written since Bach's time were lost, it could be reconstructed upon what he wrote. His life was as noble as his music. He was an affectionate father, laboring manfully and incessantly to support his large family; a good citizen, faithfully fulfilling his duties and commanding universal respect; a musician without an equal in the profundity of his

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

knowledge and the richness of his productions; the founder of modern music, the master of the organ, the composer of the highest forms of sacred music; a plain, humble man, despising rank and show, making no boast of his grand achievements, and yet recognized in the court of Frederick the Great as above courtiers and nobility by the title of his genius. "Seest thou a man diligent in business; he shall stand before kings." He was a self-reliant, self-sustained, evenly poised man, plain and unostentatious in his bearing, honorable in his intercourse with men, strong and unvarying in his home love, and guided in every event of life by a strict morality born of sincere religion. He followed the bent of his genius untrammelled by the accidents or troubles of life, and sought for no higher reward than his own conviction of the worth of his accomplishments. Such a life is to be commended not only to the young student entering upon the profession of music, but to every young person entering upon the duties of life. This little volume, therefore, worthily claims a place among "Life Stories for Young People." Though the original is inaccurate in some small details, which later biographers have corrected, the general story of his life is reliable and nearly every event of importance is included in its pages.

G. P. U.

CHICAGO, 1905

## CHAPTER I

### A FRIEND IN NEED

AT the close of a beautiful Summer day, in the year 1699, subdued and solemn strains of music from the little house of the organist of the market-town of Ohrdruff<sup>1</sup> floated through its quiet streets. A boy sat crying upon the stone steps leading to the house-door. Now and then he lifted his head, looked into the hallway, and saying in a mournfully complaining tone, "False again," or, "The second violin plays most abominably," or making some similar protest of musical sensibility, bowed his head again in sorrow and tears.

As he sat thus, a quick step was heard coming up the street. A lad, somewhat older than the other, approached and said in a clear, cheerful voice: "Why are you crying, Bastian, and what means this funeral music?"

The one addressed raised his handsome eyes, red with weeping, bowed in a dejected manner to

<sup>1</sup>Ohrdruff is a little manufacturing town in Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, about eight miles south of Gotha.

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

his questioner, and said in a low voice: "My brother is dead. Did you not know it?"<sup>2</sup>

"I had not heard a word of it," he replied. "All last week I was at my cousin's in Eisenach,<sup>3</sup> and I have but just returned. Is he dead? And so suddenly! Poor boy, I pity you from my heart. When did it happen?"

"Last evening just about this time. He had not been in his usual health for a week. He often complained of dizziness and difficulty in breathing, and yesterday while cleaning his old violin he suddenly fell and died."

Passionate sobs made his last words almost unintelligible, and the boy for a few seconds gave way to irrepressible grief.

His young friend regarded him in silence for a time, and when he had somewhat recovered from his passionate sobbing delicately sought to divert his attention from his troubles by asking, "Who are these playing so wretchedly? Friends of the deceased?"

"Three of them are. They have engaged the town clerk's assistant for second violin, and he plays badly enough to set one's teeth on edge. If my dead brother

<sup>2</sup>After the death of his father and mother, Sebastian Bach was adopted by his elder brother, Johann Christoph, the organist and music master at Ohrdruff, who gave him his earliest lessons in singing and piano-playing.

<sup>3</sup>Eisenach, a little town in Thuringia, was the birthplace of Sebastian Bach. It is also famous for the Wartburg, which stands on one of the hills near the town, where Luther lived at one time and translated the Bible into German, and as being the scene of many of the song contests of the Minnesingers.

*A FRIEND IN NEED*

could hear him, he would jump out of his coffin and drive the bungler out of his house.”

His friend smilingly nodded assent. “He is certainly a slovenly player, but it can’t be helped now.”

“That is true,” sobbed the boy.

A brief pause in the conversation was filled with the tones of the funeral music, during which his friend’s gaze rested thoughtfully and sympathetically upon the countenance of his mournful comrade, and his lips moved as if he were talking to himself. At last he resumed reluctantly, but with manifest cordiality and good-will: “Well, Bastian, what is to be done now that your brother, the organist, is dead?”

“The town will install a new organist, I suppose.”

“Of course, but that is of little consequence; I mean what will become of you?”

“Of me?” replied Sebastian, thoughtfully. “Who can say? But with God’s help I will become a skilful musician, like my good father, and as all the Bachs have been for a hundred years past.”

“You mistake my question,” said his friend. “I mean where will you live now that this house is henceforth to be closed? You are now a poor orphan. Do you expect that any of your relatives will take you in?”

Sebastian shook his head. “No, Erdmann,<sup>4</sup> I do not. Who can do it? My only remaining brother, Johann

<sup>4</sup>George Erdmann was a schoolfellow of Sebastian Bach and an excellent musician, though in after life he followed other pursuits.

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

Jakob, has left the country and gone into business in Sweden. Both my uncles, my father's brothers, have been dead for some years, and my cousins have trouble enough to get along upon their small chorister's allowance without being burdened with me. Again—”

“It must be very hard for you, my poor Bastian.”

Sebastian for a moment regarded his sympathetic friend with moistened eyes, then cordially took his arm and went slowly down the street with him.

“I will tell you about this, Erdmann; they possibly may look at the matter differently. The relatives will come to the funeral ceremonies in the morning, and it may be perhaps that this or that one will take me in until something definite can be arranged; but I am not sure that I wish them to do so. How could I be happy? These poor people have no higher ambition than to get musical education enough to fit them for an ordinary organist's position and enable them to secure a place in some Thuringian country town, and, when they get it, to go on, day after day, practising noble music as if it were a trade, just as if they were cobblers or tailors. If I were to find a home with cousins Tobias Friedrich, Johann Bernhard, Johann Christoph, or Johann Heinrich, what would become of me? All my life I should hear only the music I made myself. I should make no progress, I should never penetrate the noble mysteries of our art; I should remain a town musician like a thousand others.”

“But, Bastian, why should you trouble yourself about these matters? Why fix a goal for yourself now? You are still very young.”

*A FRIEND IN NEED*

“I am old enough to know that I must escape from this narrow musical life. Even if my brother had lived, I should not have remained with him much longer.”

“Why not? He was a skilful musician.”

“Yes, but only for himself. He either could not or would not assist me to advance. I was disgusted with his dry and uninteresting exercises, and he refused to let me practise more useful and difficult ones. He had a manuscript volume of piano studies by famous masters, like Froberger, Fischer, Kerl, Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Bruhns, and Böhm—valuable works, I assure you. Do you suppose he allowed me to have them? When I begged for the volume, he refused me and locked it up.”

“This is strange. Why should he have acted so? He could not possibly keep you from advancing in the art for which you have such decided talent.”

“Certainly not. He could do well for himself, like all the old organists round here, but he had not the faculty of making others progress. There is something forbidding and mysterious in the attitude of these old musicians of this stamp, which makes it very difficult for beginners to acquire even the rudiments.”

“That is curious; but did you at last secure those beautiful and difficult musical exercises?”

An arch smile lit up Sebastian’s countenance, immediately followed by an indignant expression: “It is a sad story, Erdmann, and it makes me feel angry whenever I think of it. But listen. My brother had locked up the manuscript in a cabinet which did not shut very

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

closely. I determined to get it, for otherwise I should remain an ignorant scholar and make no advance. One night, when my brother was asleep, I squeezed my hands—they are so little—between the wires of the cabinet and pulled the roll out, not, however, without rubbing the skin off my hands pretty badly, and carried my treasure safely away to my little chamber, where, as I had no candle, I copied the whole book by moonlight.”

“Why, you little sinner,” said Erdmann, laughing and amazed, “I call that perseverance. How long did it take you to copy it?”

“Fully six months, and my eyes are weak in consequence. And after this what do you suppose happened? One day my brother came in, unawares, when I had the exercises, and without saying by your leave carried off my precious treasure. He never brought it back, notwithstanding all my tearful entreaties.”

“Dreadful!” exclaimed Erdmann. “Worse than dreadful! How could he do it? I should have hated him.”

“No! He is still my brother. He has done me many kindnesses, and I am greatly distressed,” his voice trembled again, “greatly distressed at his death, and just as he was cleaning the old violin! He believed it was a genuine Amati and insisted that Antonio Amati’s name and symbols were pasted on it in my grandfather’s time, but I do not believe it. The tone is much too hard and rasping. I think it is an old Tyrolean country violin.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Amatis were a world-renowned family of violin-makers living at Cremona, Italy, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The most famous members of the family were Andrea A., died in 1577, the maker of the first violin; Nicola, =>

*A FRIEND IN NEED*

“So? Will he be buried to-morrow?”

“Yes.”

“And then your fate must be decided?”

“Certainly it must. The cousins then must give me my copy of the book.”

“They ought to do that at least. But tell me, what else must they give you?”

“I shall only claim what belongs to me. On an upper shelf in the cabinet there is a tin box with my christening-money, two medals inherited from my great-uncle, Heinrich, and a little money left me by my good father, which they must give me, must they not, Erdmann?”

“I suppose so. You are certainly very young yet, Bastian.”

“Young!” replied the latter, indignantly. “I am thirteen—almost fourteen years old. It is high time I was learning something useful, hearing good music, becoming acquainted with great compositions, and I cannot do that here or elsewhere in Thuringia. I must go to some great city where the musical life is intense, where famous organists delight congregations on Sunday, and public libraries lend their best books. It is for such reasons as these I cannot stay with my cousins, even if they should cordially invite me. Now, do you understand, Erdmann?”

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1568-1586; Antonio, 1589-1627; and Nicolo, 1596-1684, that last of the great violin-makers of the family.

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

During this statement his friend had been thoughtfully regarding the little Sebastian—he was very small for his age—and at last tenderly said: “I believe you are right, Sebastian. Were you to remain here you would be in wretched circumstances like all the other Bachs, although they have musical talent by nature. You must get away, and I will make you this proposition: Day after to-morrow I am going to see my mother’s brother at Lüneburg.<sup>6</sup> Go with me. Lüneburg is not a great city, but it is a much more important place than Ohrdruff, Arnstadt, or Eisenach. It was for long the residence of the Grand Duke of Brunswick, and it still has many of the advantages of a capital. There is a magnificent organ in the old Gothic Church of St. John, and every Sunday you can hear the best of music there. You would enjoy that, I fancy.”

Sebastian stood for a moment with glistening eyes, overcome with joy. “Lüneburg!” he replied with trembling voice, “St. John’s Church organ! Oh, Erdmann, the great organist Böhm,<sup>7</sup> whose majestic chorales I copied by moonlight, is the leading player there. Oh, to hear him, to hear him, I would go barefoot to Lüneburg!”

“Yes,” said Erdmann, pleased with the acceptance of his proposal, “that will be nice for you, and a few miles from there is Hamburg.”

<sup>6</sup> The capital of Lüneburg in the province of Hanover, Prussia.

<sup>7</sup> George Böhm, a countryman of Bach, was born at Goldbach in 1661. He was one of the greatest organists of his time.

*A FRIEND IN NEED*

“Where the famous Reinken, Johann Adam Reinken,<sup>8</sup> plays splendidly at St. Katherine’s Church,” interposed Sebastian, with enthusiasm. “Erdmann, my dear Erdmann, I must go; and if you will take me with you I will thank you all my life long.”

“If your relatives consent, I shall not fail to do so,” said his friend. “And once you are in Lüneburg, my uncle, if I ask him, will gladly help you to go farther.”

“Really?” said Sebastian, overcome with delight. “Oh, dear friend, how fortunate I am to have met you! I am determined to go with you whether my cousins consent or not.”

His more considerate friend advised him to keep on good terms with his relatives. “I will come in the morning and inquire,” said he. “Only be very judicious, so that they may have confidence in your good judgment and give their consent to your plans.”

“Yes, I will. But come, be sure to come,” implored Sebastian, in a beseeching tone, as he pressed his friend’s hand. “And not too late. The funeral takes place immediately after the noon service, and promptly afterward everything necessary must be done, for most of the guests will wish to leave before evening, so that they may be punctual at their posts on Monday morning. There will not be much time to spare.”

<sup>8</sup>Reinken was born at Deventer in 1663 and died as organist of St. Katherine’s Church, in Hamburg, in 1722. He had remarkable talent both as player and composer and was greatly esteemed by Bach.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

“You are right. The procession passes our house and I can then fix the time. Leave it all to me.”

“Yes, I will do so, dear Erdmann, and already I give you a thousand thanks. It seems as if a new life were opening for me. Oh! Oh! to hear Böhm play, and perhaps even Reinken, and to hear their works and play them! Could anything be finer?”

“Well,” replied his friend, endeavoring to moderate his enthusiasm, “the world has much besides this that is worth living for. But it is nice that you are pleased with your prospects. Doing things by halves will not accomplish much of any value.”

“That shall never be said of me,” interposed Sebastian, with flashing eyes. “I feel that I can accomplish something of value, but I must do it in the right way and in the right place—in Lüneburg. Lüneburg is now my watchword. I shall not shut my eyes this night. Would it were morning!”

“Have patience. The morning will not fail you. So now, *auf wiedersehen*.”

“I can scarcely wait.”

“But you must. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye. I will hurry home to pack my things.”

Thus the friends separated in the twilight, in the narrow streets of Ohrdruff.

## CHAPTER II

# IN THE WORLD

THE funeral of the organist and music master, Johann Christoph Bach, was marked by all the ceremony becoming the burial of an excellent man, a faithful servant of the church and school, and an accomplished musician. The mourners returned from the churchyard, speaking with subdued voices. They were plain, earnest men, clad in simple black coats, long-skirted waistcoats over short knee-breeches and stockings, and buckled shoes. They also wore the three-pointed hat over a small periwig.

Arrived at the house, those not belonging to the family took their departure after a few words of condolence, but the relatives entered and assembled in the sitting-room of the deceased around the old black family-table, which had been made ready for such business as it might be necessary for them to settle before they separated. This did not take long. The joint bequest, very moderate in amount, fell to the five sons of the deceased, to be divided at a fitting time. The principal difficulty was to decide as to the further care and education of the little Johann Sebastian; but they

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

were spared any trouble on his account, for they had hardly begun to consider the question when Sebastian, who had been sitting in the window looking at the funeral hymn, arose, and decorously advanced to the table.

“Dear cousins,” he boldly began, looking round the circle with large, bright eyes, “do not trouble yourselves about me. I am in my fourteenth year and am old enough to take care of myself hereafter. I thank my dead brother for all the love and kindness which he bestowed upon me to the very end, but I am not willing longer to be a burden to anyone; I shall leave this good home as early as possible to-morrow to seek my fortunes elsewhere. I beg you to give me the organ compositions which Johann Christoph took away from me, likewise the old box with my christening-money, together with your blessing, and let me go in peace.”

All present were greatly astonished at the boy’s bold little speech, and there was silence in the room for a time. It was broken by the most prominent one in the circle, Johann Valentin, eldest son of George Christoph, cantor at Schweinfurt, who said: “Your statement greatly astonishes us, dear Johann Sebastian; you are not yet of age nor able to earn a living by the practice of our beloved music. Tell us what your plans are and how you expect to support yourself. Your little christening-money will not go far.”

“My first move will be to the city of Lüneburg,” said the boy, with confidence, “where I hope to take lessons from the great organist, Böhm. My friend Erdmann,

*IN THE WORLD*

who has a kind uncle living there, goes to him tomorrow, and will take me with him and introduce me to him. I have a good singing voice and an excellent method, so I expect I shall easily secure a position as chorister and thus provide for the ordinary expenses of life. In case of extreme need, my friend Erdmann has promised me his uncle's assistance."

Johann Valentin replied: "Our family, honorably known as the Bachs, are of a contented spirit by nature, and have always been so well satisfied with their fatherland and their circumstances that, with the exception of your brother, Johann Jakob, none of them until now has desired to seek service and fortune outside of Thuringia. The Bachs until now have considered the approbation of their superiors and of their native places as more desirable than the quest for fame at great trouble and expense among jealous strangers. Are you now to be an exception, dear Johann Sebastian? Do you not believe one can become a good organist here, one well pleasing to God and man, and live here contented with his position? Your good father, Johann Ambrosius, I think, set you a commendable example. How is it then that you alone have this restlessness and this inordinate desire to associate with so-called 'great musicians'? Oh, my dear Johann Sebastian, music is not a mere matter of show and glory; it is a solemn reality. It is of little consequence whether the world hears of us, so that we strive with all our might that God may hear us and recognize our simple art."

"What you say, cousin," replied Sebastian, with an earnestness not often found in one so young, "is as true

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

as gold, and yet I cannot longer remain satisfied with what our family has thus far accomplished. What I mean is, that the Bachs should not continuously learn only from the Bachs. They must go out into the world. Every master craftsman lets his son go among strangers so that he may learn some other master's style and ways, and thus improve, or, as it were, bring fresh blood into his workmanship. Painters and sculptors go to Italy, where there are good masters and teachers, and infuse new life into their artistic work at home; while musicians alone sit immovable in their little organ-lofts and hear no one but themselves. There is no progress in that. And it is because I believe all this that I am determined to travel and try to study in other places and among other people, to hear good musicians, and to learn from them what I need to learn."

The boy's eyes glistened and his cheeks reddened as he spoke. He grew more and more excited as he proceeded, until at last he was well-nigh breathless. Finally, he ceased and looked around the circle, awaiting a gracious answer. But the cousins were also silent, and looked at each other as if paralyzed by the boy's passionate utterances, until at last Johann Ernst, Johann Christoph's eldest son, expressed the sentiment of the family, and said, in a tone of the deepest conviction, "It is only pride and the craving for empty honors that have induced you to leave here."

"That is not so," replied Sebastian, excitedly. "I am striving for the same ends as you, only in my own way."

## IN THE WORLD

If I master my art, I will elevate and improve sacred music in a worthy and judicious manner; I will play for the praise of the Lord. I will walk honestly, as did my blessed father. If I seek other ends than these may someone shatter my instrument, for I shall no longer be worthy to touch the consecrated keys.”

It was no longer a boy who spoke, but a young man, who had seriously considered his art and who was determined nothing should turn him from the right way to the highest achievements.

As such a youth the Bachs at last recognized him. After a whispered consultation the eldest voiced the final decision: “We have agreed, dear Johann Sebastian, to let you go the way you have chosen, hoping and praying it may end well; we have the utmost confidence in the sincerity of your purpose, and as for the rest we leave you in the Almighty’s hands. Forget not, among strangers, who you are and where you belong. We, the elders, will remain here, and when you return to the dear Thuringian land, come as a true Bach, as an able and pious musician, as a worthy son of your brave, faithful father.”

“I promise you all solemnly to do so,” said Sebastian, with deep emotion, as he extended his hand to each cousin, beginning with Valentin. They shook it warmly and firmly, as a mark of conciliation, and then Johann Valentin took a gulden from his little purse, as did all the others, and handed the modest sum to the blushing boy as his travel-money. They also gave him the tin

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

savings-box with the christening-money, and beside this his well-earned manuscript, an autograph motet<sup>9</sup> of his dead brother's ("Lord, if I have only Thee") for five voices, with the fundamental bass, and finally added to his brother's bequest a violin (not the supposed Amati), as well as the bow and case, so that the little traveller "may have the opportunity further to perfect himself on this instrument."

Then they dismissed the boy, who was overcome with joy and gratitude, to give him time to make his simple plans for the journey. He rushed out as if beside himself with happiness, which was still further intensified by the appearance of his true friend Erdmann at the door, whom he embraced without any regard to the parcels in his arms.

"Erdmann, dearest Erdmann," he shouted, scarcely lowering his voice, "I am free! I am going with you, God be praised!"

"Have they really let you go, and with their free consent?" said the astonished Erdmann.

"With their free consent," replied Sebastian. "At first they hesitated. They thought it improper for a Bach to go among strangers and to wish to study with other masters, but I argued so stoutly against that view, and defended my plans so earnestly, that at last they trusted me and gave their consent with many good wishes. They also contributed an ample sum of travel-money, and

<sup>9</sup>The term 'motet' is applied to church music set to Biblical texts for several voices, of moderate length, and without instrumental accompaniment.

## IN THE WORLD

gave me this violin and a composition as a remembrance of my dead brother,—but, oh, I could have remembered him without that.” And the great spiritual eyes of the boy glistened with rising emotion.

“Now all goes well,” said Erdmann. “Your cousins have taken the right view of the case. You are free, and nothing can prevent you from becoming a great musician—greater than all the Bachs, big and little, before you.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Sebastian, trembling with joy; “but when shall we start?”

“The first thing in the morning. We have a good conveyance to Gotha and day after to-morrow to Mühlhausen. Bring your baggage this evening to the Black Bear and be there yourself to-morrow morning at sunrise.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Sebastian, excitedly. His outcry rang so loudly through the house that one of the Bach cousins opened the door and reproved him: “Johann Sebastian, we are still in the house of death.”

“Forgive me,” said the really contrite lad, turning crimson, as he started up to his little chamber, while Erdmann, taking some of the reproof to himself, quietly withdrew.

Thus the memorable day came to an end crowning Sebastian’s dearest wishes. His joy could hardly have been greater had he been vouchsafed a glance into the future and realized he was taking the first step upon the road leading him to the supreme heights of his art.

*JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH*

With eager hands he joyfully packed the little bag left him by his devoted father with his scanty stock of clothes and the necessary books and papers, and took it in the darkness of the evening to the Black Bear, where the old and well-known house-servant took care of it. Then he hastened back to the organist's house, bade a cordial farewell to his relatives, ate a little soup in the kitchen, made for him by the old housemaid, took a big slice of bread, and hurried up to his chamber so that he might have a good night's rest and be ready for his early start.

There was not much sleep for him, however, that night. He lay upon his bed with wide-open eyes looking out into the serene moonlight. Like the light clouds which floated across the moon, memories and hopes swept over his young soul. Gentle, beautiful melodies entranced him and made his heart beat exultantly. Half waking, half dreaming, he raised his hands as though they touched the keys of a celestial instrument and his lips murmured disconnected words.

Thus the night hours passed between waking and sleeping. Toward morning he sank into the deep, sound sleep of youth, and notwithstanding his longings and his impatience for the journey would have slept beyond the appointed hour had not his trusty friend, the old housemaid, awakened him and reminded him of his purpose, at the first glow of dawn. It was a joyful call. Thankfully he threw his arms about her neck and drew her old head down to his. Then he dismissed her, arose and dressed, bathed his flushed face in cold water, and

*IN THE WORLD*

repaired to the kitchen, where he sat by the maidservant a few minutes while he ate his morning soup.

At last he was through. He bade farewell to his tearful friend and was about to leave the house, when a room door opened and the plain, honest face of Johann Valentin appeared.

“Johann Sebastian.”

“Dear cousin.”

“Come in.”

As the boy stood before him, he placed both hands upon his shoulders and looked into his clear blue eyes.

“My dear Johann Sebastian,” he said with deep emotion, “my heart bids me say a word to you before you leave your home. Some voice clearly tells me that great achievements and fame are in store for you. But whatever may be the outcome of the course you take this day, contrary to the usages and habits of our family, the greatest human fame is as nothing in God’s eyes if it is not humbly received by a pure and pious heart, which ascribes the honor to Him. Remember this, dear Johann Sebastian, and take from me, the eldest of the family, in place of your dear father, my heartiest wishes and blessings.”

He placed his hand upon the boy’s head, whispered a prayer, kissed him lightly upon the forehead, and softly said, “Now go in peace.”

“You shall not be disappointed in me, dear cousin,” said the boy with emotion, as he reverently kissed the