

Lesie, the Choir Boy

Alice Dunbar

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OVER and above all things nature had been lavish to Lesie Channing in the matter of a voice. It was a full, clear soprano with rich tones in it that presaged a marvel of tone in later years. He loved to sing. It was a pure joy to him to fill the hall and room of his tenement home with the only tunes that he knew — "coon" songs and music-hall ballads. But while he delighted in the sounds that he made, no one had ever told Lesie that his voice was marvellous.

Besides this, he had a seraphic, olive-skinned face with masses of curly brown hair that tossed about a broad forehead. His eyes were lustrous and innocent and his mouth was small and tender. Had he lived on Fifth Avenue, he would have been proud of his looks and have worn a velvet coat and wide lace collars. But in "Steenth street, all this beauty was a sore trial to his spirit and a lasting disgrace in the eyes of his companions. He had to be twice as aggressive as a less prepossessing boy and was forced always to be doing something in order to prove that his girl-like face did not belong to a girl-like spirit. He had made his way into "de gang" by sheer determination, a bull-dog spirit and a very hard pair of fists. When he was a small fellow he envied the bigger and more masculine looking boys, but paid little attention to them, until one of them called him "Molly" one day. Thereupon he arose, and tried to obliterate his tormentor from the face of the earth. The elation of a good fight intoxicated him, and having accomplished the annihilation in part of the aforesaid tormentor, he turned his attention to two others — and his social reputation was assured.

When it became the pleasure of the aristocrats of 'Steenth street to honor the newly opened "Pure in Heart" mission by their attendance, Lesie was first among them. Although he would have died rather than confess it, he loved to go, not because of the great scope for mischief, but because there was singing and plenty of it. Mrs. Morton, the mission manager, would beam on him as he let his voice out in full, and Lesie's joy knew no bounds. He was wont to relieve his feelings by sticking a pin into his nearest neighbor.

Then Sister Margaret came one day to a class of boys and heard him sing, and went back to her place in St. Stephen's full of this seraphic looking boy's voice. And the chorister, ever in search of fresh material for his choir, visited Mrs. Channing. There were consultations, and Lesie was called in and made to warble a verse from a hymn. The chorister was wild with delight. He was a rather phlegmatic man, but his joy in this new find burst bounds, and he almost hugged Mrs. Channing, baby and all.

In the days which followed his good fortune, Lesie was strangely silent and abstracted. He was sore afraid lest it should come to the ears of "de gang," for he feared what their opinion might be. So he played more freely than usual, and had two wholly unnecessary fights with big boys on the next street storing up an account, as it were, on which he could draw in the dark days to come.

He came home from his first morning service, and dropped into a chair without his usual cheery greeting to the baby. Mrs. Channing eyed him narrowly, and her maternal heart told her that something was not right.

"Well?" she inquired, after waiting for a word.

Lesie looked up and his gaze passed hers and sought the window.

"Ain't you satisfied," continued Mrs. Channing, "how'd you like it?"

"Aw, dey put me in a dress."

"Mercy," cried the mother, then she grew indignant.

"Wha'd dey take you fer?" she demanded.

"All de guys had 'em, jes' like de minister's."

Mrs. Channing stared at him with incredulous wonder and gravely considered the idea of keeping him home in the future. She would not allow those people to make a laughing stock of her son, no matter how much they wanted him.

But it was not the gown altogether which had produced Lesie's abstraction, although that was a great enough

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shock. He had heard the organist whisper to the first tenor that he had a face like a little St. Cecelia, and he wondered what it meant.

It did not take the news long to go through the length and breadth of 'Steenth street that Lesie was "doin' de heavy down at St. Stephen's." For a day, he was regarded with scorn unspeakable, and he went his way alone, fierce and contemptuous. Frank Smith, however, was unwise enough to groan and strike an attitude as Lesie passed. The issue was short, sharp and decisive. There was a celebration a half hour later at "Dago Joe's" expense, and his stock of peanuts was materially reduced.

Beyond the pleasure of raising his soul in song at service and rehearsals, the choir life was an irksome one to Lesie. He was entirely out of sympathy with his surroundings, and his fits of moodiness after an excursion down town grew longer and longer. The boys of St. Stephen's looked down upon him, he felt that, although the barrier which they drew was an intangible one. But the intangible barriers are the ones that count. He was not of their creed nor of their kind. They had traditions which he had not. They had clothes which he could never hope to possess. Their speech was not his nor their talk. It was a different world in which he moved, a lonely and dissatisfied guest. He would have met them singly and in groups and have vanquished them by force, had it been possible, for this was his only idea, his only knowledge of the way of asserting himself; but the chorister was very strict and there was no chance.

One Saturday night when they had gathered in groups in the choir-room awaiting the chorister, Fred Allen, an alto, accosted him with a high-pitched note of triumph in his voice.

"Bet you won't go," he said.

"Bet I will," retorted Lesie.

"Say, now, but will you?"

"Co'se," said Lesie sternly. He did not know what it was but it behooved him to affect an indifferent knowledge, for did not the honor of 'Steenth street depend upon him?"

"Well, I say," put in another boy, but it's a big thing."

"What is?" inquired Lesie forgetting his role.

"Old man Sanders," said Fred, nodding his head at the church, "is going to take us to the oratorio at Carnegie Hall, and give us a supper next week."

"Oh, well, he thinks he's doing something great," said a melancholy youth, "I'm not losing any sleep over it."

Lesie was silent. He had not been in the choir long enough to know what an oratorio was, and he felt strangely out of the whole affair. It was discussed further, until Mr. Sanders came and made the matter more specific. They were to meet him Wednesday night at the choir room and he would manage the rest. This much Lesie understood, that he would hear music and good music, and that was enough.

Mrs. Channing was in a bad humor when Wednesday came. Her husband had failed to give her a share of his wages on Saturday night, and the agent had been to the house and threatened eviction if the rent was not paid in short order. When Lesie approached her timidly with a request for a clean shirt and assistance with his dressing, she turned on him fiercely and raised a hot iron threateningly.

"Get out," she cried, "as if I didn't have enough to do to keep food in your mouth and a shelter over your head! Don't you dare to bother me wid your high-toned mess. Want a clean shirt, do you? Next thing I know, you will be wantin' a dress-suit to go to de opery."

Lesie went down stairs and into the street without a word. Well, after all, he would have a good time. He refused Dobson's invitation to go on First avenue, after a rumored dog-fight, with such a gentle manner that it caused Dobson to stare for an instant. Then he perched on the railing of the stoop and sang softly to himself until it was time to go to bed.

"Why didn't you come Wednesday?" he inquired.

"I couldn't," said Lesie simply.

The choir boys did not ask him why he was not with them at the oratorio. They had not missed him.

It was just at this time that he was assigned to a solo part to be sung at the Easter service. There were only about twenty bars to be sung, but it was a sign of great advancement, and some of the older boys looked at him with interest, even envy. On the night that the parts were assigned, Lesie walked home with a something tugging within him that made him whistle and pelt pebbles at a passing cable car.

"I'm goin' ter sing by myself Easter Sunday," he told his mother shyly.

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"Well, I don't see nuttin' in dat," she made reply.

The sweetness of it had gone in an instant. He had intended offering to carry home the basket of clothes that night. Instead, he had to be scolded to it, and somehow, the burden never seemed so heavy nor the task so irksome.

It was the last rehearsal before Easter, and Mr. Sanders was lecturing the boys with more than wonted severity.

"Keep in the house to-night," he was saying, "be careful to get sleep enough and above all, don't come here in bad condition to-morrow." It was Mr. Sander's first Easter at St. Stephen's, and he desired greatly to do himself credit.

There was dissension in the Channing household that night. A difference of opinion had arisen between the maternal and paternal members of the family. The difference was of the violent and aggressive sort and there was an alcoholic fume in the atmosphere of the kitchen. Lesie fled, with the other children, supperless to the street for refuge. There was a great expedition on. "De gang" had a business transaction down on 68th street, and Lesie joined in with a joyous war-whoop, his good resolution to go to bed forgotten, the raw, rain-laden east wind unheeded.

It was far into the night when he crept into bed, flushed with success, for his had been the voice that had led the boys on to victory in the raid against the obnoxious 68th street crowd, and his had been the arms that had dealt the most effective blows. He remembered faintly as he lay down that he should have been asleep hours before.

"Well," was his consoling reflection, "de ol' man an' de ol' woman was a scrappin' an' I guess out-doors is de bes' place fer us kids when dey gits togedder."

The next morning, he woke with a headache, his mouth felt dry and parched and his face was flushed. Mrs. Channing was sullen and paid no attention to him as he pushed aside his coffee and bread untasted. She was irritable at the world in general and was glad when Lesie left the house. He felt better when he was in the street, and forgot the headache in the gold glint of the sun and the spring freshness of the air.

The atmosphere of the church was overpowering with the perfume of hundreds of lilies and the close packing of the unwonted crowd. The sermon was long, and Lesie found his head drooping, and his senses reeling with the odor of incense and flowers. If he could only close his eyes for a minute, perhaps Sanders wouldn't see, and he would feel better. He was going over in his mind the music of his solo, and singing it mentally over and over until it mingled with the sonorous voice of the rector and became inextricably entangled in the woof of the sermon.

Then he felt someone plucking wildly at his sleeve and started into consciousness. The boy next to him had awakened him. The organ was pealing the prelude to the anthem; Sanders was glaring at him with a savage fierceness that made his heart stand still, and he distinctly heard the sallow, melancholy boy titter behind him. He stood up with the rest, but sleep was in his eyes, and fear in his soul, and the sheet of music trembled in his hand until the notes ran together in a black, unreadable mass. He could not find his place, and he dared not sing. Now, they were nearing his solo, he could hear the baritone ending his part, and the boys turning their pages. Lesie's music was at the beginning of the next leaf. He thumbed the music thickly, striving to turn it, and there was the sound of many waters in his ears. He glanced up at Sanders and caught a grim look in the chorister's eyes that nerved him to desperation. The organ had played the first note of his solo, and the boys were looking at him with expectancy. He parted his dry lips but no sound came forth, and the organ had finished the first bar. He moistened his lips and tried again. This time a note came forth. It was hoarse and cracked and false. Mr. Sanders finished the solo.

He rushed from the choir-room when the service was over, without waiting to hang up his surplice. He could not stand the titters and giggles of the other boys. He ran, rather than walked up to 'Steenth street. His heart was full of bitterness and humiliation and his head was confused and wandering. Mrs. Channing had remembered that he was to do something out of the ordinary to-day, and she greeted him with renewed interest.

"Well, how was it?"

"Aw, I ain't goin' dere no more," he snapped, "dem guys make me tired."

Thereafter, Lesie confined his musical accomplishments to the singing class of the "Pure in Heart" Mission.

"That boy will be heard from," said a visitor to the mission one evening as Lesie was singing his very best.

And so he was in after years, but that belongs to another time, and is for some one else to tell.

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