

Hans Sachs

From

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On the 5th November 1494, a tailor of Nuremberg, by name Hans Sachs, had a son born to him. The son, named Hans (John) like his father, after having received some schooling, was apprenticed to a shoemaker.

Young Hans availed himself of the liberty of thought, which this humble profession afforded, to penetrate into the higher world, in which his soul delighted. Songs, after they ceased in the castles of chivalry, seem to have sought, and to have found, an asylum among the burghers of the joyous cities of Germany. A singing-school was held in the Church of Nuremberg. The performances which took place there, and in which young Hans was accustomed to join, opened his heart to religious impressions, and helped to awaken a taste for poetry and music.

The genius of the youth could not long brook confinement within the walls of his workshop. He wished to see with his own eyes that world of which he had read so much, and been told so many stories by his comrades, and which his imagination peopled with wonders. In 1511 he bundles up his effects, and sets out in the direction of the South.

The young traveller, falling in with gay comrades, students roaming the country, and many dangerous temptations soon feels a serious struggle within. The lusts of the world and his pious resolutions war with each other. Trembling for the result, he takes flight, and, in 1513, hides himself in the little town of Wels in Austria, where he lives in retirement, devoting himself to the study of the fine arts.

The emperor, Maximilian, happens to pass through the town with a brilliant suite, and the young poet is quite fascinated with the splendour of the court. The prince receives him into his hunting train, and Hans once more forgets himself, under the noisy vaults of the palace of Insprück. But his conscience again sounds the alarm, and the young huntsman, immediately throwing aside his brilliant uniform, takes his departure, and arrives at Schwatz near Munich. There, in 1514, at the age of twenty, he composed his first hymn, "In Honour of God," setting it to a remarkable air. It was received with great applause.

In the course of his journeys, he was witness to many sad proofs of the abuses under which religion groaned. On his return to Nuremberg, Hans commences business, marries, and becomes the father of a family. When the Reformation breaks out he turns a listening ear. He cordially welcomes the Holy Scripture, which had already endeared itself to him as a poet, and he no longer searches it for images and hymns, but for the light of truth. To this truth he consecrates his lyre. From a humble stall in front of one of the gates of the imperial city of Nuremberg, come forth notes which re-echo over Germany, and everywhere excite a deep interest in the great revolution which is going forward.

The spiritual songs of Hans Sachs, and his Bible turned into verse, greatly aided the work. Indeed, it would be difficult to say which of the two did most for it – the elector of Saxony, vicegerent of the empire, or the shoemaker of Nuremberg.

¹ Glasgow 1845