

When the Organ was Silent

By Norma B. Youngberg

Francis Pohan sat on the organ stool in the front room of his home in Borneo. Looking at a songbook he played the notes of a hymn with his right hand, then his left hand. He was determined to master the song. But when he put both hands on the keys and tried to play, the melody just didn't sound right.

"What's the matter with me today?" he said to himself. "My fingers are like lumps of mud."

He got up from the organ and went outside where his sister, Ellen, was sitting under the big durian tree, reading one of her books.

She looked up at him and asked, "Isn't this your practice time?"

"Yes, but I can't seem to hit the keys right," he replied, "so I thought I'd come out and look for the little truck I lost yesterday."

As she hunted for his toy in the long grass, Francis thought about how they had gotten the organ. Not many people had one. And certainly missionary families on the island of Borneo in Sarawak loved to have such an instrument.

"If we could only have an organ of our own," Francis had often said to Ellen, "it would be like heaven."

"Perhaps you should pray about it," their father had suggested. "Maybe God will help us get one."

When they finally got an organ, they knew it was in answer to the prayers they had offered. A man was moving away from the country and he asked such a low price for the organ that the Pohans decided to buy it.

"I should go back and try that hymn again," Francis said to himself, "but I know I can't play it."

At that moment they boy heard some cars go by on the jungle road. Then he saw soldiers in uniform coming along the path. It was wartime in Borneo, and enemy soldiers sometimes made trips out into the country around Kuching, foraging for food and other things they wanted.

Francis' heart beat fast as the soldiers came up to the house. There were about a dozen of them. They laughed and looked friendly enough and spoke to the children in loud voices.

“Is your father home? Is he in the house?”

Father must have heard the noise because he came out the front door and stood before the enemy soldiers.

“What do you want of me?” he asked them.

“We are from the school,” their leader explained. Francis remembered that the soldiers had taken over the Mission Training School near the town of Kuching. They were using it to train soldiers.

“We are looking for an organ or a piano. We need some kind of musical instrument at our school.” The leader looked at Father. “Is there an organ in your chapel here?”

Father shook his head. “We did have one, but some of your people took it quite a while ago.”

“Do you have one in your house?” one of the soldiers asked.

“We have one,” Father admitted.

Francis looked at Ellen. Her face was pale. He could see that she was holding back tears with great effort. He wanted to tell the soldiers that the organ was theirs, that God had answered their prayers and given it to them. Instead he stood quietly in the grass and scuffed a twig with his bare toe.

He knew that when enemy soldiers asked for something, they weren’t just asking for it. They were demanding it, and it had to be given to them. Whatever the soldiers wanted, they took.

Father was already leading the soldiers into the house. Francis hurried in with them and stood watching as the leader looked the organ over.

“Does it work?” he asked. “Is it in good order?”

“Yes, I think so,” Father answered in a low voice.

“Better try it,” the leader ordered one of the soldiers.

The young officer sat down. He pumped the pedals and pressed the keys, but no sound came out of the organ. He looked up at the leader and then tried again. His face turned red.

“It doesn’t work, sir,” he said.

Another soldier sat down and tried to play the organ, but it was still silent. Not a sound came from it.

Francis was frightened, but he had been praying ever since the soldiers came into the yard and asked about the organ. He prayed, "Dear God, please don't let them take away the organ from us."

Now the leader turned to Father. "The instrument seems to be out of order." His face was red with and angry.

Father's voice was a little unsteady. "It usually plays very well. There must be some small thing wrong. I'm sure it can be easily fixed."

"Do you know of anyone in this place who could repair it?" the leader asked his men. Then he turned to Father and asked him the same question. None of them knew of anyone.

The leader was getting impatient. He handed his gun to one of the other men and sat down at the organ himself. He pressed the keys. He looked at the pedals and pumped them hard. He examined the swells and even shook the organ. It was all of no use. Not a sound came out.

The officer stood up, reached for his gun, and said in disgust, "Your organ is no good—positively useless! We couldn't use a piece of junk like that!" With some insulting words he called his soldiers after him and they went out the door and down the path to the road.

The whole Pohan family stood on the porch and watched them go. When they had disappeared in the trees a little way down the path, Francis hurried to the organ. He pedaled. He played the keys, but no sound came out. The organ was silent. Something was certainly wrong with it. A big lump appeared in his throat.

Father and Mother looked at the organ. "I can't understand what can be wrong with it," Father said. "It's of no use to us either. Just the same. I'm glad the soldiers didn't take it. Surely it can be fixed."

He went back to his work, and Francis went outside where Ellen had returned to her book. For a half hour the two children sat looking at pictures and talking about the soldiers. Both of them felt very sad about the organ.

"I'm going in," Francis finally said. "I'll get Father's tools and take the organ to pieces. I'm going to find out why it won't work. Maybe white ants have eaten a hole in the bellows."

He went back into the house and looked at the organ. "I'll try it once more," he told himself as he put the hammer on the floor.

He sat on the stool and pushed the pedals. When he played the keys, the music came out as usual.

“Mother, Father, Ellen!” Francis yelled. “The organ is all right, it isn’t hurt at all! It plays as well as ever!”

Father and Mother hurried into the room. Ellen came running and burst in the door, her eyes shining.

“Who was praying about this?” Father asked.

“I was,” everyone answered at once.

“It is God who struck the organ dumb,” Father told them.

“It must have been God’s angel who troubled me, so I left the organ during my usual practice time,” Francis spoke in an awed whisper.

“It must have been,” Ellen said. “If you had kept on playing, the soldiers would have heard you as they came up the path.”

“And even after they went—right after—it still didn’t—.”

Father smiled in a solemn way. “Of course it didn’t because the soldiers were still close enough to hear. God’s angels always manage everything perfectly.”

In that moment the whole family felt the unseen presence of the One who was a living messenger from heaven. The veil between heaven and earth was parted just a little, and they knelt in reverent thankfulness around the organ that God had struck dumb.