

Invisible Hands

by Laura Burdon

London, 1802

Listen closely. It's about to begin. A whirring... a click-clacking... an orchestra of in-drawn breaths.

Thomas Weeks is the collector, curator and custodian of the hundred-foot-long Museum of Mechanical Curiosities: a small room lined with blue velvet and filled with infinite possibilities. You may not notice his inconspicuous presence as he stands in the corner, still, against a wall of rotating, swaying and vibrating clocks.

But look closely and you will see that he has always been there, watching over the children as they crowd around his automated works, delighting as they nudge each other for the best spot then race to be the first to witness the next wonder. Their pink flushed faces light up as one of Weeks' most prized possessions – a silver metal swan in a glass case – comes alive, dips its head in a brisk nod, twists its neck and moves to music with such unexpected fluidity that it is at once beautiful and unnerving.

The more daring youngsters inch closer to the box rumoured to contain an over-sized tarantula, its bulbous body and spindly legs crafted from steel. Three sharp clicks signal that something terrible and marvellous is about to happen. A pop, and the metallic creature crawls from its box on the ground and scurries around their feet, creating a web of jubilant shrieks and sending the children giggling with frightened glee into their mothers' arms.

Thomas Weeks is the conjuror behind the curtain. He has spent years meticulously building and bringing life to his collection of curiosities. Some he has sourced and acquired from other masters of the art, others he has created himself, spending hours tinkering with mechanisms until they appear to move all on their own. Birds that fly on metal wings, dolls that dance and bow, clocks that chime and open to reveal miniature people inside. It has been the work of a lifetime, and his reward is to stand back, unnoticed, bathing in the hubbub of life and noise and wonderment that is his making.

At the end of the day, after perusing the museum, the mothers gather their children, pulling them reluctantly away and stream into the adjacent shop to purchase self-opening umbrellas and clockwork dolls in order to try to take a little bit of Mr Weeks' magic home with them. Their children beg for an insect that springs from its box and races around the floor before winding down to a stuttering, whirring stop.

We will stay in the museum with Mr Weeks. But we are not alone. It is closing time but one small girl remains, her parents, nowhere to be seen. She is standing over there in front of a self-playing organ that is hidden in the base of a polished wooden cabinet. Weeks glimpses her from across the room. She is wearing a white dress with ruffles at the neck and white socks pulled up to her knees. The cabinet doors have been opened and the child's head only just reaches the top of the open compartment. She is turned away, her hair a mass of golden curls like metallic springs.

As we approach, you can hear the organ let out a chirpy tune previously masked by the general cacophony in the room. Inside, a barrel is turning as if played haltingly by invisible hands.

“It’s a very special cabinet, isn’t it?” Weeks asked the girl. He stands awkwardly several feet away from her.

The child’s head swivels, her wide grey eyes dragging reluctantly from the spellbinding object. “But who is playing it?” she asks.

“I am.” he replies simply.

The infant’s plump lips form a pout, and her forehead puckers with displeasure as she looks down at Weeks’ unmoving hands. She considers his answer for a moment. “No, you’re not.” She concludes.

Weeks takes a cautious step closer and crouches so as to be at the child’s level. “I made this cabinet, and I wound the organ. This organ doesn’t need hands to play it, only to wind it. See?” He deftly reaches a hand inside the workings and brings the music to a stop. He cranks the handle. There is a whirring, a click-clacking, then three clear notes sing out and a new tune, ‘God Save the King’ which plays majestically. Weeks lifts both his hands and holds them up like a magician who has just performed a trick.

The girl’s face turns back and forth from the man to the machine. She shifts from puzzled to understanding. “It’s very clever. How many songs can you play?”

“There are twelve different tunes.” He says, proudly.

The pair listen.

“How long will it play for?” The child asks.

“Oh, it winds down eventually, you need to give it a good, long wind, but as long as you crank it up again, it will always play for you.”

She opens her mouth to reply, or perhaps to venture another question, but we are interrupted by the banging of the front door, and a woman bustling into the room, calling out in frustration.

“There you are, you little rascal!” she exclaims, sweeping through the museum and seizing the little girl’s hand. She turns to Mr Weeks. “I’m very sorry, she’s always disappearing. What have you been doing, little one? I thought you were following along with your brothers?”

The girl’s expression shows no remorse. “This man was showing me his magic music cabinet. He made it himself. The cabinet and the music.”

“Did he, now? It’s very kind of him to show you it. It’s a lovely museum. Come along, now Lily. The nice man needs to close the museum now and we need to get home for supper.”

The child tugs on her mother’s hand. “Can we come again sometime?” she pleads.

“We’ll see.” is the non-committal response.

Once the child has left, Weeks works his way slowly around the room, switching off each of the mechanisms as the evening light drains away outside. One by one, the moving parts judder to stillness, the sounds to silence. As he is turning off the final lamp, he turns and looks across at the spot where the girl had stood in front of the organ and thinks he sees the glint of the barrel continuing to turn, moved by invisible hands.

County Durham, 2020

Allow me, dear reader, to shift the sands of time and take you to visit another custodian, a custodian of a castle, which is indeed bigger than The Museum of Mechanical Curiosities, but no less filled with wonders. Come with me through the walled garden, with its unfurling spring leaves and budding buds and walk with me across the open grassland, up the slope and through Raby Castle's gates, to join him. Just as Mr Weeks wanted to create marvels that would delight and endure, Alan wants to preserve them.

Alan is an early-riser. He is a shoe-shiner, a smart and careful man who buffs and polishes his car to keep the lustre for longer. He arrives at work at seven sharp and is the clockwork that keeps the events and visits to the castle ticking along with precision and care.

Today has been a tiring day with scores of school children arriving by bus, flooding the castle, playing knights and princesses. Alan is somewhat wearied by the task of keeping their curious, creeping fingers from touching the precious décor, their small bodies pressing against the red velvet ropes that cordon off sections of the grand and ancient rooms. In the spring and summer months, it is a hub of life and activity orchestrated by Alan and his team of volunteer staff who show off the castle and its history to the general public.

He trains the staff, oversees the maintenance of the rooms and grounds, changes the objects and furniture on display. He is the man in the wings, a part of the fixtures and fittings, as people say. At the end of the day he is the last to leave. His job isn't to clean the premises, but once the visitors and volunteer staff have left, it has become his custom to patrol the corridors of the castle, clutching a cloth that he uses to wipe away the smudges left on windows from inquisitive faces, the fingerprints on mantelpieces. He also carries with him an exact memory of the state in which in each room is to be kept. He repositions chairs and straightens curtains, making sure everything is just so.

This one night in particular, the sun is dipping low in the sky, bleaching the colours of the fields and sky into pastels. The evenings are beginning to stretch out longer now, like a cat stretching out in the sunshine. Alan pauses in his duties and gazes out of the large windows in the drawing room for a moment, his eyes searching for the deer that roam the grounds, but all is still. The castle is uncharacteristically quiet. He adjusts the thick, maroon curtains and makes his way through the halls one last time on his way out.

It is then that he notices a sound like the pitter-patter of footsteps on the floor below him. What is that sound, dear listener? The castle should be empty. Let us follow closely behind as he retraces his steps, descends the staircase, passing watchful portraits of the men and women who have made the castle their home over the years. The noise seems to be coming from further into the building. He remembers the time that one of the ducks that grace the grounds had waddled into the castle's interior unnoticed and was found in the kitchens, as if waiting to be served as a dish at a great banquet.

He pauses as the sound seems to stop, then start up again. He follows it down into the servant's quarters: a maze of smaller rooms coming off a narrow corridor. The light down here is dimmer and fails to reach the corners. Some of these rooms are open to the public, to allow them to see where the kitchen staff used to live and work in days gone by, but other rooms are being used for the storage of the furniture and items not currently on display.

The footsteps seem louder now. The sound seems to be coming from one of the storage rooms, which are kept locked. He takes out his bunch of keys and opens the door, and, as if someone knows he is following them, the sound comes to a sudden stop.

He looks around.

The room contains a heavy 19th century carved wooden bed, several chests of drawers and boxes of ornate vases and golden clocks that have been a part of the castle's collections but now lay unused. A chestnut-coloured cabinet is placed in the centre of the room with a secret hidden inside. The cabinet had once been on display in the drawing room but had been moved out when the room was refurbished several years ago. Alan carefully and systematically inspects the room, using the cloth to cover his hand to protect himself from the dust. There is no one there. No person, no wandering duck.

Once he is satisfied that the room is empty of life, he makes his way towards the door, thinking the only sound he can now hear is the sound of his own heavy footsteps.

But listen closely. It's about to begin. Alan pauses as he hears a new sound coming from the cabinet. Quiet, at first, then it grows in confidence. A familiar sound that always signifies that something is about to happen. Something marvellous. A whirring... a click-clacking...