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# CHRISTIAN GELLERT'S LAST CHRISTMAS

**By Berthold Auerbach**

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**1869**

Three o'clock had just struck from the tower of St. Nicholas, Leipzig, on the afternoon of December 22d, 1768, when a man, wrapped in a loose overcoat, came out of the door of the University. His countenance was exceedingly gentle, and on his features cheerfulness still lingered, for he had been gazing upon a hundred cheerful faces; after him thronged a troop of students, who, holding back, allowed him to precede them: the passengers in the streets saluted him, and some, students, who pressed forwards and hurried past him homewards, saluted him quite reverentially. He returned their salutations with a surprised and almost deprecatory air, and yet he knew, and could not conceal from himself, that he was one of the best beloved, not only in the good city of Leipzig, but in all lands far and wide.

It was Christian Furchtegott Gellert, the Poet of Fables, Hymns, and Lays, who was just leaving his college.

When we read his "Lectures upon Morals," which were not printed until after his death, we obtain but a very incomplete idea of the great power with which they came immediately from Gellert's mouth. Indeed, it was his voice, and the touching manner in which he delivered his lectures, that made so deep an impression upon his hearers; and Rabener was right when once he wrote to a friend, that "the philanthropic voice" of Gellert belonged to his words.

Above all, however, it was the amiable and pure personal character of Gellert which vividly and edifyingly impressed young hearts. Gellert was himself the best example of pure moral teaching; and the best which a teacher can give his pupils is faith in the victorious might, and the stability of the eternal moral laws. His lessons were for the Life, for his life in itself was a lesson. Many a victory over the troubles of life, over temptations of every kind, ay, many an elevation to nobility of thought, and to purity of action, had its origin in that lecture-hall, at the feet of Gellert.

It was as though Gellert felt that it was the last time he would deliver these lectures; that those words so often and so impressively uttered would be heard no more from his mouth; and there was a peculiar sadness, yet a peculiar strength, in all he said that day.

He had this day earnestly recommended modesty and humility; and it appeared almost offensive to him, that people as he went should tempt him in regard to these very virtues; for continually he heard men whisper, "That is Gellert!"

What is fame, and what is honor? A cloak of many colors, without warmth, without protection: and now, as he walked along, his heart literally froze in his bosom, as he confessed to himself that he had as yet done nothing—nothing which could give him a feeling of real satisfaction. Men honored him and loved him: but what was all that worth? His innermost heart could not be satisfied with that; in his own estimation he deserved no meed of praise; and where, where was there any evidence of that higher and purer life which he would fain bring about! Then, again, the Spirit would comfort him and say: "Much seed is lost, much falls in stony places, and much on good ground and brings forth sevenfold."

His inmost soul heard not the consolation, for his body was weak and sore burdened from his youth up, and in his latter days yet more than ever; and there are conditions of the body in which the most elevating words, and the cheeriest notes of joy, strike dull and heavy on the soul. It is one of the bitterest experiences of life to discover how little one man can really be to another. How joyous is that youthful freshness which can believe that, by a thought transferred to another's heart, we can induce him to become another being, to live according to what he must acknowledge true, to throw aside his previous delusions, and return to the right path!

"The youngsters go their way! Do your words follow after? Whither are they going? What are now their thoughts? What manner of life will be theirs? My heart yearns after them, but cannot be with them: oh, how happy were those messengers of the Spirit, who cried aloud to youth or manhood the words of the Spirit, that they must leave their former ways, and thenceforth change to other beings! Pardon me, O God! that I would fain be like them; I am weak and vile, and yet, methinks, there must be words as yet unheard, unknown—oh! where are they, those words which at once lay hold upon the soul?"

With such heavy thoughts went Gellert away from his college-gate to Rosenthal. There was but one small pathway cleared, but the passers cheerfully made way for him, and walked in the snow that they might leave him the pathway unimpeded; but he felt sad, and "as if each tree had somewhat to cast at him." Like all men really pure, and cleaving to the good with all their might, Gellert was not only far from contenting himself with work already done: he also, in his anxiety to be doing, almost forgot that he had ever done anything, and thus he was, in the best sense of the word, modest; he began with each fresh day his course of action afresh, as if he now for the first time had anything to accomplish. And yet he might have been happy, in the reflection how brightly beamed his teaching for ever, though his own life was often clouded. For as the sun which glows on summer days still lives as concentrated warmth in wine, and somewhere on some winter night warms up a human heart, so is the sunshine in that man's life whose vocation it is to impart to others the conceptions of his own mind. Nay, there is here far more; for the refreshing draught here offered is not diminished, though thousands drink thereof.

Twilight had set in when Gellert returned home to his dwelling, which had for its sign a "Schwarz Brett" or "black board." His old servant, Sauer by name, took off his overcoat; and his amanuensis, Gödike, asked whether the Professor had any commands; being answered in the negative, Gödike retired, and Sauer lighted the lamp upon the study-table. "Some letters have arrived," said he, as he pointed to several upon the table: Gellert inclined his head, and Sauer retired also. Outside, however, he stood awhile with Gödike, and both spoke sorrowfully of the fact that the Professor was evidently again suffering severely. "There is a melancholy," said Gödike, "and it is the most usual, in which the inward depression easily changes to displeasure against every one, and the household of the melancholic suffers thereby intolerably; for the displeasure turns against them,—no one does anything properly, nothing is in its place. How very different is Gellert's melancholy! Not a soul suffers from it but himself, against himself alone his gloomy thoughts turn, and towards every other creature he is always kind, amiable, and obliging: he bites his lips; but when he speaks to any one, he is wholly good, forbearing, and self-forgetful."

Whilst they were talking together, Gellert was sitting in his room, and had lighted a pipe to dispel the agitation which he would experience in opening his letters; and while smoking, he could read them much more comfortably. He reproached himself for smoking, which was said to be injurious to his health, but he could not quite give up the "horrible practice," as he called it.

He first examined the addresses and seals of the letters which had arrived, then quietly opened and read them. A fitful smile passed over his features; there were letters from well-known friends, full of love and admiration, but from strangers also, who, in all kinds of heart-distress, took counsel of him. He read the letters full of friendly applause, first hastily, that he might have the right of reading them again, and that he might not know all at once; and when he had read a friend's letter for the second time, he sprang from his seat and cried, "Thank God! thank God! that I am so fortunate as to have such friends!" To his inwardly diffident nature these helps were a real requirement; they served to cheer him, and only those who did not know him called his joy at the reception of praise—conceit; it was, on the contrary, the truest modesty. How often did he sit there, and all that he had taught and written, all that he had ever been to men in word and deed, faded, vanished, and died away, and he appeared to himself but a useless servant of the world. His friends he answered immediately; and as his inward melancholy vanished, and the philanthropy, nay, the sprightliness of his soul beamed forth, when he was among men and looked in a living face, so was it also with his letters. When he bethought him of the friends to whom he was writing, he not only acquired tranquillity, that virtue for which his whole life long he strove; but his loving nature received new life, and only by slight intimations did he betray the heaviness and dejection which weighed upon his soul. He was, in the full sense of the word, "philanthropic," in the sight of good men; and in thoughts for their welfare, there was for him a real happiness and a joyous animation.

When, however, he had done writing and felt lonely again, the gloomy spirits came back: he had seated himself, wishing to raise his thoughts for composing a sacred song; but he was ill at ease, and had no power to express that inward, firm, and self-rejoicing might of faith which lived in him. Again and again the scoffers and freethinkers rose up before his thoughts: he must refute their objections, and not until that was done did he become himself.

It is a hard position, when a creative spirit cannot forget the adversaries which on all sides oppose him in the world: they come unsummoned to the room and will not be expelled; they peer over the shoulder, and tug at the hand which fain would write; they turn images upside down, and distort the thoughts; and here and there, from ceiling and wall, they grin, and scoff, and oppose: and what was just gushing as an aspiration from the soul, is converted to a confused absurdity.

At such a time, the spirit, courageous and self-dependent, must take refuge in itself and show a firm front to a world of foes.

A strong nature boldly hurls his inkstand at the Devil's head; goes to battle with his opponents with words both written and spoken; and keeps his own individuality free from the perplexities with which opponents disturb all that has been previously done, and make the soul unsteadfast and unnerved for what is to come.

Gellert's was no battling, defiant nature, which relies upon itself; he did not hurl his opponents down and go his way; he would convince them, and so they were always ready to encounter him. And as the applause of his friends rejoiced him, so the opposition of his enemies could sink him in deep dejection. Besides, he had always been weakly; he had, as he himself complained, in addition to frequent coughs and a pain in his loins, a continual gnawing and pressure in the centre of his chest, which accompanied him from his first rising in the morning until he slept at night.

Thus he sat for a while, in deep dejection: and, as often before, his only wish was, that God would give him grace whereby when his hour was come, he might die piously and tranquilly.

It was past midnight when he sought his bed and extinguished his light.

And the buckets at the well go up and go down.

About the same hour, in Duben Forest, the rustic Christopher was rising from his bed. As with steel and flint he scattered sparks upon the tinder, in kindling himself a light, his wife, awaking, cried:

"Why that heavy sigh?"

"Ah! life is a burden: I 'm the most harassed mortal in the world. The pettiest office-clerk may now be abed in peace, and need n't break off his sleep, while I must go out and brave wind and weather."

"Be content," replied his wife: "why, I dreamt you had actually been made magistrate, and wore something on your head like a king's crown."

"Oh! you women; as though what you see is n't enough, you like to chatter about what you dream."

"Light the lamp, too," said his wife, "and I 'll get up and make you a nice porridge."

The peasant, putting a candle in his lantern, went to the stable; and after he had given some fodder to the horses, he seated himself upon the manger. With his hands squeezed between his knees and his head bent down, he reflected over and over again what a wretched existence he had of it. "Why," thought he, "are so many men so well-off, so comfortable, whilst you must be always toiling? What care I if envy be not a virtue?—and yet I 'm not envious, I don't grudge others being well-off, only I should like to be well-off too; oh, for a quiet, easy life! Am I not worse off than a horse? He gets his fodder at the proper time, and takes no care about it. Why did my father make my brother a minister? He gets his salary without any trouble, sits in a warm room, has no care in the world; and I must slave and torment myself."

Strange to say, his very next thought, that he would like to be made local magistrate, he would in no wise confess to himself.

He sat still a long while; then he went back again to the sitting-room, past the kitchen, where the fire was burning cheerily. He seated himself at the table and waited for his morning porridge. On the table lay an open book; his children had been reading it the previous evening: involuntarily taking it up, he began to read. Suddenly he started, rubbed his eyes, and then read again. How comes this verse here just at this moment? He kept his hand upon the book, and so easily had he caught the words, that he repeated them to himself softly with his lips, and nodded several times, as much as to say: "That's true!" And he said aloud: "It's all there together: short and sweet!" and he was still staring at it, when his wife brought in the smoking porridge. Taking off his cap, he folded his hands and said aloud:

*"Accept God's gifts with resignation,  
Content to lack what thou hast not:  
In every lot there 's consolation;  
There 's trouble, too, in every lot!"*

The wife looked at her husband with amazement. What a strange expression was upon his face! And as he sat down and began to eat, she said: "What is the meaning of that grace? What has come to you? Where did you find it?"

"It is the best of all graces, the very best,—real God's word. Yes, and all your life you 've never made such nice porridge before. You must have put something special in it!"

"I don't know what you mean. Stop! There 's the book lying there—ah! that's it—and it's by Gellert, of Leipzig."

"What! Gellert, of Leipzig! Men with ideas like that don't live now; there may have been such, a thousand years ago, in holy lands, not among us; those are the words of a saint of old."

"And I tell you they are by Gellert, of Leipzig, of whom your brother has told us; in fact, he was his tutor, and have n't you heard how pious and good he is?"

"I would n't have believed that such men still lived, and so near us, too, as Leipzig."

"Well, but those who lived a thousand years ago were also once living creatures: and over Leipzig is just the same heaven, and the same sun shines, and the same God rules, as over all other cities."

"Oh! yes, my brother has an apt pupil in you!"

"Well, and why not? I 've treasured up all he told us of Professor Gellert."

"Professor!"

"Yes, Professor!"

"A man with such a proud, new-fangled title could n't write anything like that!"

"He did n't give himself the title, and he is poor enough withal! and how hard it has fared with him! Even from childhood he has been well acquainted with poverty: his father was a poor minister in Haynichen, with thirteen children; and Gellert, when quite a little fellow, was obliged to be a copying office-clerk: who can tell whether he did n't then contract that physical weakness of his? And now that he 's an old man, things will never go better with him; he has often no wood, and must be pinched with cold. It is with him, perhaps, as with that student of whom your brother has told us, who is as poor as a rat, and yet must read; and so in winter he lies in bed with an empty stomach, until day is far advanced; and he has his book before him, and first he takes out one hand to hold his book, and then, when that is numb with cold, the other. Ah! tongue cannot tell how poorly the man must live; and yet your brother has told me, if he has but a few pounds, he does n't think at all of himself; he always looks out for one still poorer than he is, and then gives all away: and he 's always engaged in aiding and assisting others. Oh! dear, and yet he is so poor! May be at this moment he is hungry and cold; and he is said to be in ill-health, besides."

"Wife, I would willingly do the man a good turn if I could. If, now, he had some land, I would plough, and sow, and reap, and carry, and thresh by the week together for him. I should like to pay him attention in such a way that he might know there was at least one who cared for him. But his profession is one in which I can't be of any use to him."

"Well, just seek him out and speak with him once; you are going to-day, you know, with your wood to Leipzig. Seek him out and thank him; that sort of thing does such a man's heart good. Anybody can see him."

"Yes, yes; I should like much to see him, and hold out to him my hand,—but not empty: I wish I had something!"

"Speak to your brother, and get him to give you a note to him."

"No, no; say nothing to my brother; but it might be possible for me to meet him in the street. Give me my Sunday coat; it will come to no harm under my cloak."

When his wife brought him the coat, she said: "If, now, Gellert had a wife, or a household of his own, one might send him something; but your brother says he is a bachelor, and lives quite alone."

Christopher had never before so cheerfully harnessed his horses and put them to his wood-laden wagon; for a long while he had not given his hand so gayly to his wife at parting as to-day. Now he started with his heavily-laden vehicle through the village; the wheels creaked and crackled in the snow. At the parsonage he stopped, and looked away yonder where his brother was still sleeping; he thought he would wake him and tell him his intention: but suddenly he whipped up his horses, and continued his route. He would n't yet bind himself to his intention—perchance it was but a passing thought; he does n't own that to himself, but he says to himself that he will surprise his brother with the news of what he has done; and then his thoughts wandered away to the good man still sleeping yonder in the city; and he hummed the verse to himself in an old familiar tune.

Wonderfully in life do effects manifest them-selves, of which we have no trace. Gellert, too, heard in his dreams a singing; he knew not what it was, but it rang so consolingly, so joyously!... Christopher drove on, and he felt as though a bandage had been taken from his eyes; he reflected what a nice house, what a bonny wife and rosy children he had, and how warm the cloak which he had thrown over him was, and how well off were both man and beast; and through the still night he drove along, and beside him sat a spirit; but not an illusion of the brain, such as in olden time men conjured up to their terror, a good spirit sat beside him—beside the woodman who his whole life long had never believed that anything could have power over him but what had hands and feet.

It is said that, on troublous nights, evil spirits settle upon the necks of men, and belabor them so that they gasp and sweat for very terror; quite another sort it was to-day which sat by the woodman: and his heart was warm, and its beating quick.

In ancient times, men also carried loads of wood through the night, that heretics might be burned thereon: these men thought they were doing a good deed in helping to execute justice; and who can say how painful it was to their hearts, when they were forced to think: To-morrow, on this wood which now you carry, will shriek, and crackle, and gasp, a human being like yourself? Who can tell what black spirits settled on the necks of those who bore the wood to make the funeral-pile? How very different was it to-day with our woodman Christopher!

And earlier still, in ancient times, men brought wood to the temple, whereon they offered victims in the honor of God; and, according to their notions, they did a good deed: for when words can no longer suffice to express the fervency of the heart, it gladly offers what it prizes, what it dearly loves, as a proof of its devotion, of the earnestness of its intent.

How differently went Christopher from the Duben Forest upon his way! He knew not whether he were intending to bring a purer offering than men had brought in bygone ages; but his heart grew warm within him.

It was day as he arrived before the gates of Leipzig. Here there met him a funeral-procession; behind the bier the scholars of St. Thomas, in long black cloaks, were chanting. Christopher stopped and raised his hat. Whom were they burying? Supposing it were Gellert. Yes, surely, he thought, it is he: and how gladly, said he to himself, would you now have done him a kindness,—ay, even given him your wood! Yes, indeed you would, and now he is dead, and you cannot give him any help!

As soon as the train had passed, Christopher asked who was being buried. It was a simple burgher, it was not Gellert; and in the deep breath which Christopher drew lay a double signification: on the one hand, was joy that Gellert was not dead; on the other, a still small voice whispered to him that he had now really promised to give him the wood: ah! but whom had he promised?—himself: and it is easy to argue with one's own conscience.

Superstition babbles of conjuring-spells, by which, without the co-operation of the patient, the evil spirit



can be summarily ejected. It would be convenient if one had that power, but, in truth, it is not so: it is long ere the evil desire and the evil habit are removed from the soul into which they have nestled; and the will, for a long while in bondage, must co-operate, if a releasing spell from without is to set the prisoner free.

One can only be guided, but himself must move his feet.

As Christopher now looked about him, he found that he had stopped close by an inn; he drove his load a little aside, went into the parlor, and drank a glass of warmed beer. There was already a goodly company, and not far from Christopher sat a husbandman with his son, a student here, who was telling him how there had been lately quite a stir. Professor Gellert had been ill, and riding a well-trained horse had been recommended for his health. Now Prince Henry of Prussia, during the Seven Years' War, at the occupation of Leipzig, had sent him a piebald, that had died a short time ago; and the Elector, hearing of it, had sent Gellert from Dresden another—a chestnut—with golden bridle, blue velvet saddle, and gold-embroidered housings. Half the city had assembled when the groom, a man with iron-gray hair, brought the horse; and for several days it was to be seen at the stable; but Gellert dared not mount it, it was so young and high-spirited. The rustic now asked his son whether the Professor did not make money enough to procure a horse of his own, to which the son answered: "Certainly not. His salary is but one hundred and twenty-five dollars, and his further gains are inconsiderable. His Lectures on Morals he gives publicly, i. e., gratis, and he has hundreds of hearers; and, therefore, at his own lectures, which must be paid for, he has so many the fewer. To be sure, he has now and then presents from grand patrons; but no one gives him, once and for all, enough to live upon, and to have all over with a single acknowledgment."

Our friend Christopher started as he heard this; he had quite made up his mind to take Gellert the wood; but he had yet to do it. How easy were virtue, if will and deed were the same thing! if performance could immediately succeed to the moment of burning enthusiasm! But one must make way over obstacles; over those that outwardly lie in one's path, and over those that are hidden deep in the heart; and negligence has a thousand very cunning advocates.

How many go forth, prompted by good intentions, but let little hindrances turn them from their way—entirely from their way of life! In front of the house Christopher met other woodmen whom he knew, and—"You are stirring betimes!" "Prices are good to-day!" "But little comes to the market now!" was the cry from all sides. Christopher wanted to say that all that did n't concern him, but he was ashamed to confess what his design was, and an inward voice told him he must not lie. Without answering he joined the rest, and wended his way to the market; and on the road he thought: "There are Peter, and Godfrey, and John, who have seven times your means, and not one of them, I'm sure, would think of doing anything of this kind; why will you be the kind-hearted fool? Stay! what matters it what others do or leave undone? Every man shall answer for himself. Yes, but go to market—it is better it should be so; yes, certainly, much better: sell your wood—who knows? perhaps he does n't want it—and take him the proceeds, or at least the greater portion. But is the wood still yours? You have, properly speaking, already given it away; it has only not been taken from your keeping...."

There are people who cannot give; they can only let a thing be taken either by the hand of chance, or by urgency and entreaty. Christopher had such fast hold of possession, that it was only after sore wrestling that he let go; and yet his heart was kind, at least to-day it was so disposed, but the tempter whispered: "It is not easy to find so good-natured a fellow as you. How readily would you have given, had the man been in want, and your good intention must go for the deed." Still, on the other hand, there was something in him which made opposition,—an echo from those hours, when, in the still night, he was driving hither,—and it burned in him like sacred fire, and it said, "You must now accomplish what you intended. Certainly no one knows of it, and you are responsible to no one; but you know of it yourself, and One above you knows, and how shall you be justified?" And he said to himself, "I 'll stand by this: look, it is just nine; if no one ask the price of your wood until ten o'clock, until the stroke of ten,—until it has done striking, I mean; if no one ask, then the wood belongs to Professor Gellert: but if a buyer come, then it is a sign that you need not—should not give it away. There, that's all settled. But how? what means this? Can you make your good deed dependent on such a chance as this? No, no; I don't mean it. But yet—yet—only for a joke, I 'll try it."

Temptation kept him turning as it were in a circle, and still he stood with an apparently quiet heart by his wagon in the market. The people who heard him muttering in this way to himself looked at him with wonder, and passed by him to another wagon, as though he had not been there. It struck nine. Can you wait patiently another hour? Christopher lighted his pipe, and looked calmly on, while this and that load was driven off. It struck the quarter, half-hour, three-quarters. Christopher now put his pipe in his pocket; it had long been cold, and his hands were almost frozen; all his blood had rushed to his heart. Now it struck the full hour, stroke after stroke. At first he counted; then he fancied he had lost a stroke and miscalculated. Either voluntarily or involuntarily, he said to himself, when it had finished striking, "You 're wrong; it is nine, not ten." He turned round that he might not see the dial, and thus he stood for some time, with his hands upon the wagon-rack, gazing at the wood. He knew not how long he had been thus standing, when some one tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "How much for the load of wood?"

Christopher turned round: there was an odd look of irresolution in his eyes as he said: "Eh? eh? what time is it?"

"Half-past ten."

"Then the wood is now no longer mine—at least to sell:" and, collecting himself, he became suddenly warm, and with firm hand turned his horses round, and begged the woodmen who accompanied him to point him out the way to the house with the "Schwarz Brett," Dr. Junius's. There he delivered a full load: at each log he took out of the wagon he smiled oddly. The wood-measurer measured the wood carefully, turning each log and placing it exactly, that there might not be a crevice anywhere.

"Why are you so over-particular to-day, pray?" asked Christopher, and he received for answer:

"Professor Gellert must have a fair load; every shaving kept back from him were a sin."

Christopher laughed aloud, and the wood-measurer looked at him with amazement; for such particularity generally provoked a quarrel.

Christopher had still some logs over; these he kept by him on the wagon. At this moment the servant Sauer came up, and asked to whom the wood belonged.

"To Professor Gellert," answered Christopher.

"The man's mad! it isn't true. Professor Gellert has not bought any wood; it is my business to look after that."

"He has not bought it, and yet it is his!" cried Christopher.

Sauer was on the point of giving the mad peasant a hearty scolding, raising his voice so much the louder, as it was striking eleven by St. Nicholas. At this moment, however, he became suddenly mute; for yonder from the University there came, with tired gait, a man of a noble countenance: at every step he made, on this side and on that, off came the hats and the caps of the passers-by, and Sauer simply called out, "There comes the Professor himself."

What a peculiar expression passed over Christopher's face! He looked at the new-comer, and so earnest was his gaze, that Gellert, who always walked with his head bowed, suddenly looked up. Christopher said: "Mr. Gellert, I am glad to see you still alive."

"I thank you," said Gellert, and made as though he would pass on; but Christopher stepped up closer to him, and, stretching out his hand to him, said: "I have taken the liberty—I should like—will you give me your hand, Mr. Gellert?"

Gellert drew his long thin hand out of his muff and placed it in the hard oaken-like hand of the peasant; and at this moment, when the peasant's hand lay in the scholar's palm, as one felt the other's pressure in actual living grasp, there took place, though the mortal actors in the scene were all unconscious of it, a renewal of that healthy life which alone can make a people one.

How long had the learned world, wrapped up in itself, separated from the fellow-men around, thought in Latin, felt as foreigners, and lived buried in contemplation of bygone worlds! From the time of Gellert commences the ever-increasing unity of good-fellowship throughout all classes of life, kept up by mutual giving and receiving. As the scholar—as the solitary poet endeavors to work upon others by lays that quicken and songs that incite, so he in his turn is a debtor to his age, and the lonely thinking and writing become the property of all; but the effects are not seen in a moment; for higher than the most highly gifted spirit of any single man is the spirit of a nation. With the pressure which Gellert and the peasant exchanged commenced a mighty change in universal life, which never more can cease to act.

"Permit me to enter your room?" said Christopher, and Gellert nodded assent. He was so courteous that he motioned to the peasant to enter first; however, Sauer went close after him: he thought it must be a madman; he must protect his master; the man looked just as if he were drunk. Gellert, with his amanuensis, Gödike, followed them.

Gellert, however, felt that the man must be actuated by pure motives: he bade the others retire, and took Christopher alone into his study; and, as he clasped his left with his own right hand, he asked: "Well, my good friend, what is your business?"

"Eh? oh! nothing—I 've only brought you a load of wood there—a fair, full load; however, I 'll give you the few logs which I have in my wagon, as well."

"My good man, my servant Sauer looks after buying my wood."

"It is no question of buying. No, my dear sir, I give it to you."

"Give it to me? Why me particularly?"

"Oh! sir, you do not know at all what good you do, what good you have done me; and my wife was right; why should there not be really pious men in our day too? Surely the sun still shines as he shone thousands of years ago; all is now the same as then; and the God of old is still living."

"Certainly, certainly; I am glad to see you so pious."

"Ah! believe me, dear sir, I am not always so pious; and that I am so disposed to-day is owing to you. We have no more confessionals now, but I can confess to you: and you have taken a heavier load from my heart than a wagon-load of wood. Oh! sir, I am not what I was. In my early days I was a high-spirited, merry lad, and out in the field, and indoors in the inn and the spinning-room, there was none who could sing against me; but that is long past. What has a man on whose head the grave-blossoms are growing," and he pointed to his gray head, "to do with all that trash? And besides, the Seven Years' War has put a stop to all our singing. But last night, in the midst of the fearful cold, I sang a lay set expressly for me—all old tunes go to it: and it seemed to me as though I saw a sign-post which pointed I know not whither—or, nay, I do know whither." And now the peasant related how discontented and unhappy in mind he had been, and how the words in the lay had all at once raised his spirits and accompanied him upon the journey, like a good fellow who talks to one cheerfully.

At this part of the peasant's tale Gellert folded his hands in silence, and the peasant concluded: "How I always envied others, I cannot now think why; but you I do envy, sir: I should like to be as you."

And Gellert answered: "I thank God, and rejoice greatly that my writings have been of service to you. Think not so well of me. Would God I were really the good man I appear in your eyes! I am far from being such as I should, such as I would fain be. I write my books for my own improvement also, to show myself as well as others what manner of men we should be."

Laughing, the peasant replied: "You put me in mind of the story my poor mother used to tell of the old minister; he stood up once in the pulpit and said: 'My dear friends, I speak not only for you, but for myself also; I, too, have need of it.'"

Christopher laughed outrageously when he had finished, and Gellert smiled, and said: "Yes, whoever in the darkness lighteth another with a lamp, lighteth himself also; and the light is not part of ourselves,—it is put into our hands by Him who hath appointed the suns their courses."

The peasant stood speechless, and looked upon the ground: there was something within him which took away the power of looking up; he was only conscious that it ill became him to laugh so loudly just now, when

he told the story of the old minister.

A longer pause ensued, and Gellert seemed to be lost in reflection upon this reference to a minister's work, for he said half to himself: "Oh! how would it fulfil my dearest wish to be a village-pastor! To move about among my people, and really be one with them; the friend of their souls my whole life long, never to lose them out of my sight! Yonder goes one whom I have led into the right way; there another, with whom I still wrestle, but whom I shall assuredly save; and in them all the teaching lives which God proclaims by me. Did I not think that I should be acting against my duty, I would this moment choose a country life for the remnant of my days. When I look from my window over the country, I have before me the broad sky, of which we citizens know but little, a scene entirely new; there I stand and lose myself for half an hour in gazing and in thinking. Yes, good friend, envy no man in the rank of scholars. Look at me; I am almost always ill; and what a burden is a sickly body! How strong, on the contrary, are you! I am never happier than when, without being remarked, I can watch a dinner-table thronged by hungry men and maids. Even if these folks be not generally so happy as their superiors, at table they are certainly happier."

"Yes, sir; we relish our eating and drinking. And, lately, when felling and sorting that wood below, I was more than usually lively; it seems as though I had a notion I was to do some good with it."

"And must I permit you to make me a present?" asked Gellert, resting his chin upon his left hand.

The peasant answered: "It is not worth talking about."

"Nay, it might be well worth talking about; but I accept your present. It is pride not to be ready to accept a gift. Is not all we have a gift from God? And what one man gives another, he gives, as is most appropriately said, for God's sake. Were I your minister, I should be pleased to accept a present from you. You see, good friend, we men have no occasion to thank each other. You have given me nothing of yours, and I have given you nothing of mine. That the trees grow in the forest is none of your doing, it is the work of the Creator and Preserver of the world; and the soil is not yours; and the sun and the rain are not yours; they all are the works of His hand; and if, perchance, I have some healthy thoughts rising up in my soul, which benefit my fellow-men, it is none of mine, it is His doing. The word is not mine, and the spirit is not mine; and I am but an instrument in His hand. Therefore one man needs not to utter words of thanks to his fellow, if every one would but acknowledge who it really is that gives."

The peasant looked up in astonishment. Gellert remarked it, and said: "Understand me aright. I thank you from my heart; you have done a kind action. But that the trees grow is none of yours, and it is none of mine that thoughts arise in me; every one simply tills his field, and tends his woodland, and the honest, assiduous toil he gives thereto is his virtue. That you felled, loaded, and brought the wood, and wish no recompense for your labor, is very thank-worthy. My wood was more easily felled; but those still nights which I and all of my calling pass in heavy thought—who can tell what toil there is in them? There is in the world an adjustment which no one sees, and which but seldom discovers itself; and this and that shift thither and hither, and the scales of the balance become even, and then ceases all distinction between 'mine' and 'thine,' and in the still forest rings an axe for me, and in the silent night my spirit thinks and my pen writes for you."

The peasant passed both his hands over his temples, and his look was as though he said to himself, "Where are you? Are you still in the world? Is it a mortal man who speaks to you? Are you in Leipzig, in that populous city where men jostle one another for gain and bare existence?"

Below might be heard the creaking of the saw as the wood was being Sundered: and now the near horse neighs, and Christopher is in the world again. "It may injure the horse to stand so long in the cold; and no money for the wood! but perhaps a sick horse to take home into the bargain; that would be too much," he thought.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Professor," said he—he had his hat under his arm, and was rubbing his hands—"yes, I am delighted with what I have done; and I value the lesson, believe me, more than ten loads of wood: and never shall I forget you to my dying day. And though I see you are not so poor as I had imagined, still I don't regret it. Oh! no, certainly not at all."

"Eh! did you think me so very poor, then?"

"Yes, miserably poor."

"I have always been poor, but God has never suffered me to be a single day without necessaries. I have in the world much happiness which I have not deserved, and much unhappiness I have not, which perchance I have deserved. I have found much favor with both high and low, for which I cannot sufficiently thank God. And now tell me, cannot I give you something, or obtain something for you? You are a local magistrate, I presume?"

"Why so?"

"You look like it: you might be."

Christopher had taken his hat into his hands, and was crumpling it up now; he half closed his eyes, and with a sly, inquiring glance, he peered at Gellert. Suddenly, however, the expression of his face changed, and the muscles quivered, as he said: "Sir, what a man are you! How you can dive into the recesses of one's heart! I have really pined night and day, and been cross with the whole world, because I could not be magistrate, and you, sir, you have actually helped to overcome that in me. Oh! sir, as soon as I read that verse in your book, I had an idea, and now I see still more plainly that you must be a man of God, who can pluck the heart from one's bosom, and turn it round and round. I had thought I could never have another moment's happiness, if my neighbor, Hans Gottlieb, should be magistrate: and with that verse of yours, it has been with me as when one calms the blood with a magic spell."

"Well, my good friend, I am rejoiced to hear it: believe me, every one has in himself alone a whole host to govern. What can so strongly urge men to wish to govern others? What can it profit you to be local magistrate, when to accomplish your object you must perhaps do something wrong? What were the fame, not only of a village, but even of the whole world, if you could have no self-respect? Let it suffice for you to perform your daily duties with uprightness; let your joys be centred in your wife and children, and you will be happy. What need you more? Think not that honor and station would make you happy. Rejoice, and again I



say, rejoice: 'A contented spirit is a continual feast.' I often whisper this to myself, when I feel disposed to give way to dejection: and although misery be not our fault, yet lack of endurance and of patience in misery is undoubtedly our fault."

"I would my wife were here too, that she also might hear this; I grudge myself the hearing of it all alone; I cannot remember it all properly, and yet I should like to tell it to her word for word. Who would have thought that, by standing upon a load of wood, one could get a peep into heaven!"

Gellert in silence bowed his head; and afterwards he said: "Yes, rejoice in your deed, as I do in your gift. Your wood is sacrificial-wood. In olden time—and it was right in principle, because man could not yet offer prayer and thanks in spirit—it was a custom and ordinance to bring something from one's possessions, as a proof of devotion: this was a sacrifice. And the more important the gift to be given, or the request to be granted, the more costly was the sacrifice. Our God will have no victims; but whatsoever you do unto one of the least of His, you do unto Him. Such are our sacrifices. My dear friend, from my heart I thank you; for you have done me a kindness, in that you have given me a real, undeniable proof, that my words have penetrated your heart, and that I do not live on for nothing: and treasure it up in your heart, that you have caused real joy to one who is often, very often, weighed down with heaviness and sorrow. You have not only kindled bright tapers upon my Christmas-tree, but the tree itself burns, gives light, and warms: the bush burns, and is not consumed, which is an image of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and its admonition to trust in the Most High in this wilderness of life, in mourning and in woe. Oh! my dear friend, I have been nigh unto death. What a solemn, quaking stride is the stride into eternity! What a difference between ideas of death in the days of health, and on the brink of the grave! And how shall I show myself worthy of longer life? By learning better to die. And, mark, when I sit here in solitude pursuing my thoughts, keeping some and driving away others, then I can think, that in distant valleys, upon distant mountains, there are living men who carry my thoughts within their hearts; and for them I live, and they are near and dear to me, till one day we shall meet where there is no more parting, no more separation. Peasant and scholar, let us abide as we are. Give me your hand—farewell!"

And once again, the soft and the hard hand were clasped together, and Christopher really trembled as Gellert laid his hand upon his shoulder. They shook hands, and therewith something touched the heart of each more impressively, more completely, than ever words could touch it. Christopher got downstairs without knowing how: below, he threw down the extra logs of wood, which he had kept back, with a clatter from the wagon, and then drove briskly from the city. Not till he arrived at Lindenthal did he allow himself and his horses rest or food. He had driven away empty: he had nothing on his wagon, nothing in his purse; and yet who can tell what treasures he took home; and who can tell what inextinguishable fire he left behind him yonder, by that lonely scholar!

Gellert, who usually dined at his brother's, today had dinner brought into his own room, remained quite alone, and did not go out again: he had experienced quite enough excitement, and society he had in his own thoughts. Oh! to find that there are open, susceptible hearts, is a blessing to him that writes in solitude, and is as wondrous to him as though he dipped his pen in streams of sunshine, and as if all he wrote were Light. The raindrop which falls from the cloud cannot tell upon what plant it drops: there is a quickening power in it, but for what? And a thought which finds expression from a human heart; an action, nay, a whole life is like the raindrop falling from the cloud: the whole period of a life endures no longer than the raindrop needs for falling. And as for knowing where your life is continued, how your work proceeds, you cannot attain to that.

And in the night all was still around: nothing was astir; the whole earth was simple rest, as Gellert sat in his room by his lonely lamp; his hand lay upon an open book, and his eyes were fixed upon the empty air; and on a sudden came once more upon him that melancholy gloom, which so easily resumes its place after more than usual excitement.

It is as though the soul, suddenly elevated above all, must still remember the heaviness it but now experienced, though that expresses itself as tears of joy in the eye.

In Gellert, however, this melancholy had a more peculiar phase: a sort of timidity had rooted itself in him, connected with his weak chest, and that secret gnawing pain in his head; it was a fearfulness which his manner of life only tended to increase. Surrounded though he was by nothing but love and admiration in the world, he could not divest himself of the fear that all which is most horrible and terrible would burst suddenly upon him: and so he gazed fixedly before him. He passed his hand over his face, and with an effort concentrated his looks and thoughts upon surrounding objects, saying to himself almost aloud: "How comforting is light! Were there no light from without to illumine objects for us, we should perish in gloom, in the shadows of night. And light is a gentle friend that watches by us, and, when we are sunk in sorrow, points out to us that the world is still here, that it calls, and beckons us, and requires of us duty and cheerfulness. 'You must not be lost in self,' it says, 'see! the world is still here:' and a friend beside us is as a light which illumines surrounding objects; we cannot forget them, we must see them and mingle with them. How hard is life, and how little I accomplish! I would fain awaken the whole world to goodness and to love; but my voice is weak, my strength is insufficient: how insignificant is all I do!"

And now he rose up and strode across the room; and he stood at the hearth where the fire was burning, made of wood given to him that very day, and his thoughts reverted to the man who had given it. Why had he not asked his name, and where he came from? Perchance he might have been able in thought to follow him all the way, as he drove home; and now... but yet 'tis more, 'tis better as it is: it is not an individual, it is not So-and-so, who has shown his gratitude, but all the world by the mouth of one. "The kindnesses I receive," he thought, "are indeed trials; but yet I ought to accept them with thanks. I will try henceforth to be a benefactor to others as others are to me, without display, and with grateful thanks to God, our highest Benefactor: this will I do, and search no further for the why and for the wherefore." And once more a voice spoke within him, and he stood erect, and raised his arms on high. "Who knows," he thought, "whether at this moment I have not been in this or that place, to this or that man, a brother, a friend, a comforter, a saviour; and from house to house, may be, my spirit travels, awakening, enlivening, refreshing—yonder in the attic, where burns a solitary light; and afar in some village a mother is sitting by her child, and hearing him repeat the thoughts I have arranged in verse; and peradventure some solitary old man, who is waiting for death, is



now sitting by his fireside, and his lips are uttering my words."

"And yonder in the church, the choir is chanting a hymn of yours; could you have written this hymn without its vigor in your heart? Oh! no, it *must* be there." And with trembling he thought: "There is nothing so small as to have no place in the government of God! Should you not then believe that He suffered this day's incident to happen for your joy? Oh! were it so, what happiness were yours! A heart renewed."... He moved to the window, looked up to heaven, and prayed inwardly: "My soul is with my brothers and my sisters: nay, it is with Thee, my God, and in humility I acknowledge how richly Thou hast blessed me. And if, in the kingdom of the world to come, a soul should cry to me: 'Thou didst guide and cheer me on to happiness eternal!' all hail! my friend, my benefactor, my glory in the presence of God.... In these thoughts let me die, and pardon me my weakness and my sins!"

"And the evening and morning were the first day."

At early morning, Gellert was sitting at his table, and reading according to his invariable custom, first of all in the Bible. He never left the Bible open—he always shut it with a peaceful, devotional air, after he had read therein: there was something grateful as well as reverential in his manner of closing the volume; the holy words should not lie uncovered.

To-day, however, the Bible was lying open when he rose. His eye fell upon the history of the creation, and at the words, "And the evening and the morning were the first day," he leaned back his head against the arm-chair, and kept his hand upon the book, as though he would grasp with his hand also the lofty thought, how night and day were divided.

For a long while he sat thus, and he was wondrously bright in spirit, and a soft reminiscence dawned upon him; of a bright day in childhood, when he had been so happy, and in Haynichen, his native place, had gone out with his father for a walk. An inward warmth roused his heart to quicker pulsation; and suddenly he started and looked about him: he had been humming a tune.

Up from the street came the busy sound of day: at other times how insufferable he had found it! and now how joyous it seemed that men should bestir themselves, and turn to all sorts of occupations! There was a sound of crumbling snow: and how nice to have a house and a blaze upon the hearth! "And the evening and the morning were the first day!" And man getteth himself a light in the darkness: but how long, O man! could you make it endure? What could you do with your artificial light, if God did not cause His sun to shine? Without it grows no grass, no corn. On the hand lying upon the book there fell a bright sunbeam. How soon, at other times, would Gellert have drawn the defensive curtain! Now he watches the little motes that play about in the sunbeam.

The servant brought coffee, and the amanuensis, Gödike, asked if there were anything to do. Generally, Gellert scarce lifted his head from his books, hastily acknowledging the attention and reading on in silence; to-day, he motioned to Gödike to stay, and said to Sauer, "Another cup: Mr. Gödike will take coffee with me. God has given me a day of rejoicing." Sauer brought the cup, and Gellert said: "Yes, God has given me a day of rejoicing, and what I am most thankful for is, that He has granted me strength to thank Him with all my heart: not so entirely, however, as I should like."

"Thank God, Mr. Professor, that you are once more in health, and cheerful: and permit me, Mr. Professor, to tell you that I was myself also ill a short time ago, and I then learned a lesson which I shall never forget. Who is most grateful? The convalescent. He learns to love God and His beautiful world anew; he is grateful for everything, and delighted with everything. What a flavor has his first cup of coffee! How he enjoys his first walk outside the house, outside the gate! The houses, the trees, all give us greeting: all is again in us full of health and joy!" So said Gödike, and Gellert rejoined:

"You are a good creature, and have just spoken good words. Certainly, the convalescent is the most grateful. We are, however, for the most part, sick in spirit, and have not strength to recover: and a sickly, stricken spirit is the heaviest pain."

Long time the two sat quietly together: it struck eight. Gellert started up, and cried irritably: "There, now, you have allowed me to forget that I must be on my way to the University."

"The vacation has begun: Mr. Professor has no lecture to-day."

"No lecture to-day? Ah! and I believe today is just the time when I could have told my young friends something that would have benefited them for their whole lives."

There was a shuffling of many feet outside the door: the door opened, and several boys from St. Thomas' School-choir advanced and sang to Gellert some of his own hymns; and as they chanted the verse—

*"And haply there—oh! grant it, Heaven!  
Some blessed saint will greet me too;  
'All hail! all hail! to you was given  
To save my life and soul, to you!  
O God! my God! what joy to be  
The winner of a soul to thee!"*

Gellert wept aloud, folded his hands, and raised his eyes to heaven.

A happier Christmas than that of 1768 had Gellert never seen; and it was his last. Scarcely a year after, on the 13th of December, 1769, Gellert died a pious, tranquil death, such as he had ever coveted.

As the long train which followed his bier moved to the churchyard of St. John's, Leipzig, a peasant with his wife and children in holiday clothes entered among the last. It was Christopher with his family. The whole way he had been silent: and whilst his wife wept passionately at the pastor's touching address, it was only by the working of his features that Christopher showed how deeply moved he was.

But on the way home he said: "I am glad I did him a kindness in his lifetime; it would now be too late."

The summer after, when he built a new house, he had this verse placed upon it as an inscription:

*"Accept God's gifts with resignation,  
Content to lack what thou hast not:"*

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