

Georg Ebers

The Nuts



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THE NUTS

A Christmas Story for my Children and Grandchildren

By Georg Ebers

The wounded colonel, whom we were nursing back to health in our house, was not allowed to walk long, and in the afternoon, after he had pottered about a little, he was obliged to rest in the comfortable old easy-chair, which was known as grandfather's chair.

When twilight fell, our dear guest lighted the last of the three pipes, which the doctor permitted him to smoke every day, and made a sign to the children, which the young people obeyed gladly, for they loved to listen to his stories.

The convalescent was under orders not to talk for more than half an hour at a time, for his wounds were so severe that our experienced physician declared it to be contrary to the laws of nature and quite phenomenal that he should be among the living at all.

As for his stories, they had never failed to hold the attention of his audience; this was partly due to the fact that he usually had to break them off at the point where the interest had reached its climax. Moreover, the deep voice of the narrator was much gentler than one would have expected, after looking at the broad-shouldered, heavy figure, and there lay in his suppressed, and often whispered tones a secret charm, which the children were not the only ones to feel; besides which his eyes produced their share of the profound impression, for every emotion that disturbed his easily-excited soul found a reflection therein.

That the colonel openly preferred our six-year-old Hermý to his brothers and sisters was due to the circumstance that the child had once burst into tears at a look from the officer, which the latter employed to call the children to order, if they were inattentive, or exhibited signs of unbelief when he had not expected it. After this Hermý was so evidently his darling that there was no further chance for Hermý's younger sister, who had at first promised to be the favourite, and I shall never forget the soft, almost motherly, caressing tones that came from that grey-bearded man with the large round head and strong face, when he sought to comfort the child.

It was remarkable to see how easily this man, who was accustomed to obedience, and famous for his bravery and keen energy, could become a child among children. He had lost a beloved wife, a little son, about Hermý's age, and a young daughter, and no doubt our numerous family reminded him of these departed ones. As for his tales, he separated them into distinct categories. Some of them he began with the words: "Here I am," and then he held himself strictly to the truth. Others began: "Once upon a time." While the former were drawn mostly from his own full and eventful life, the latter were fairy stories, pure and simple, sometimes already well known, sometimes made up, wherein fairies, ghosts, elves, gnomes, goblins and dragons, will-o'-the-wisps, nixies, kelpies and dwarfs disported themselves.

Christmas was approaching, and the next day, Christmas-eve, the tree was to be lighted. On the twenty-third of December, a little while before the hour for story-telling, Hermý came home, and exhibited to his brothers the trifling presents, which he had chosen: an eraser for his father, a lead-pencil for his mother, a bag of nuts for his grandmother, and similar trifles which, though insignificant in themselves, had nevertheless exhausted his little store of savings. His elder brothers, to whom he had exhibited with great pride these purchases, expressed none of the admiration which he had expected, but began to tease him by calling the things "trash," as indeed they were, and poking fun at the "wonderful presents" of their small brother; they would have been less cruel, perhaps, had he been one of their sisters.

Karl wanted to know what their father, who never was known to make a drawing, would do with an eraser, and Kurt added that he did not see the use of giving their grandmother nuts, when she had more in her own garden than all of them put together would receive on ten Christmas-eves.

Bright tears gathered in the eyes of the little one, and he cast a troubled look at his despised treasures, in which he had rejoiced so heartily only a short time before.

He began to sob quietly, and saying dejectedly: "But I hadn't any more money!" he stuffed his gifts, shorn of their glamour into his pockets.

The colonel had watched the scene in silence; now, however, he drew his favourite to him, kissed him, and caressed his fair curls. Then he invited him gaily to sit right close to him on the footstool, and bade the other children to sit down,

too, and told Karl and Kurt to keep their ears wide open.

My wife and I entered at this moment--we heard later of what had happened--and begged the colonel to allow us to listen also. The permission was willingly granted; after the lamp was brought, for it was later than usual, and we had settled ourselves on the sofa, the colonel stroked his moustache for some time, and began, after he had gazed quietly before him for a moment: "To-day my story shall be called, 'The Nuts.' Does that please you, Hermynia?"

The little one smiled at him expectantly and nodded his head. The colonel continued:

"You believe, no doubt, children, that no one ever came back from the dead, and that therefore no mortal knows what Heaven looks like, nor Hell. But I--look at me well--I can tell you something about it."

Here he made a short pause while my wife handed him his pipe and a match. The children looked at one another in doubt and suspicion, for this was the first story of the colonel which had not begun with, "Here I am," or, "Once upon a time," and they were consequently uncertain whether it was a true story or one that he had made up. Wolfgang, who is thirteen and my oldest boy, and who already calls his younger brothers, "the young ones," --and promises to be a true child of the times, inclined to believe it the latter, but even he sat up straighter and looked puzzled as the colonel continued:

"The two balls that I have in here, and the sabre cut on my shoulder,-- but you know how and where I received them--to be brief, I sank from my horse onto the grass in the afternoon, and not until the following morning was I found by the ambulance corps and carried to the hospital. There they brought me to life again. In the interim--which lasted for the half of a day and one whole night--I was certainly not alive like one of you, or any other two-legged creature endowed with five senses."

With these words his penetrating eyes glanced from Karl to Kurt; the girls caught hold of one another's hands and one could plainly read in their expressions that they considered it rash to be in such close proximity to a person who had erstwhile been dead. It was fortunate for them that the resuscitated colonel was so good, and that there was no doubt about his actual existence, which was proved by his voice and the smoke that he puffed into the air during every pause.

"Yes, children," he began anew, "a great wonder was worked on me, an old man. This long body here lay on the bloody ground among groaning men, dying horses, broken gun-carriages, ammunition wagons, exploded bombshells, and discarded weapons; but my soul--I cannot have been too hardened a sinner in this world--my soul was permitted to soar to Heaven. One, two, three, as fast as you can say, 'That is an apple,' or 'The fair Ina has a pretty doll in her lap,' and it had arrived. And now--I can see it in your eyes--you would like to know how it seems in Heaven, and God knows I cannot blame you, for it is beautiful, marvellously beautiful, only unfortunately I am not allowed even to attempt its description. That must ever remain a mystery to the living because--but that is no matter, and evil would befall me if I were to chatter."

At this point the colonel was interrupted by many expressions of disappointment, but he was resolute, and continued in a peremptory tone:

"That will do. Description indeed is forbidden to me; but there are certain of my experiences about which I may tell you. So listen! That Hell lies underneath Heaven you have doubtless heard from some one or other. Naturally the holy dead see and hear nothing of the pains of the lost, for that would entirely spoil the joys of Paradise for them; but now and then--I believe once a year--it is given to the blessed to look down into Hell. There is, however, one condition in particular attached to this privilege. When the dome which conceals Hell from the sight of the angels is opened, it is for the relief of the condemned. God in his mercy has decreed that the saints shall look down into the abyss in order to tell St. Peter if they see among the damned any one from whom they have received any benefit, or of whom they have even heard any good. If the keeper of Heaven's gate is pleased with the generous action which the lost soul performed while on earth, he has the power of shortening the time of punishment, or can even pardon it altogether, and bid it enter into Paradise.

"As for me, I arrived in Paradise on a day when Hell was open to view, and came to know, thereby, many strange things. Ah! That was the hardest part of my story; I trust that you have understood it?"

The narrator's glance sought the children's eyes once more; but this time questioningly rather than peremptorily. When the young lips all cried "yes," and "of course," he smiled, nodded his massive head amiably, and continued:

"That the angels are full of pity, and glad to relieve the misery of the unfortunate, whoever they are, and wherever they

may be, goes without saying, and it will not be necessary to tell you how diligently they sought to remember some one good deed that might redound to the credit of one of the lost. But St. Peter is a mild and just judge, and the gleaner yielded but a small return, for only a few of the angels could recall any act that was worth mentioning. It was also granted to me to look into the place of torment, and the things I saw there were too awful. Picture it to yourself as you will! When I recovered from the horror that fell upon me, I recognized many men and women whom I had known on earth. Among them were many whom I had been accustomed to consider pious and virtuous, and whom I had expected to find in a high place in Heaven, rather than there below, and yet of those very persons the Elect could recall the fewest deeds that had been done from purely generous motives. An act was mentioned of this one or that, which on the surface seemed good, sometimes even great,—but there on high the springs of human actions are open to view, as well as the real end, which the author had in mind, and these were always such that those who had performed the best deeds could be accredited with the least charitable intention. Their pious works had always been executed in order to make them conspicuous in the eyes of men, or to attain for themselves some distinction, or to flatter their vanity, or to arouse the envy of their neighbours, or to contribute in some indirect way to the increase of their riches. Perhaps you may not altogether understand what I mean; but no matter, your mother may explain as much as she thinks good for you.

"The poor things who were disappointed, as well as the unfortunate ones for whom no voice was raised, made me very unhappy; but I could do nothing for them.

"Among the latter I noticed a woman whom I had known well on earth, and who deserved to be among the lost, I thought. I had never anticipated any other sentence for her. You do not understand, children, what a cold heart is; but hers had been either ice or stone. Although she had possessed more than was needed to gratify her own wants, she could never be moved by the most touching appeals of the poorest to relieve their distress. She had used other people to satisfy her selfish desires and then discarded them ruthlessly. She had gone through life without loving one single soul—of that I felt convinced—and no one had loved her, and she had died unregretted. She must have been as wretched on earth as she was there in Hell; for which of us can be happy here, if we do not love and are not loved?

"There is no chance of a voice being raised in her favour,' I said to myself. But I was wrong; for at that moment a lovely angel-child flew past me on its blue and white wings. Without any sign of fear it flew direct to St. Peter, who looked formidable enough with his long beard and great keys, and, pointing with its little forefinger to the hard-hearted woman, cried: 'She once gave me a handful of nuts.'

"Really,' answered the keeper of Heaven. 'That was not much, and yet I am surprised; for that woman would not part with so much as a pin, during her life. But you little one, who were you on earth?'

"Little Hannele was my name,' answered the angel. 'I died of starvation, and only once did any one give me anything in my life to make me happy, and that was that woman yonder.'

"Marvellous,' answered Peter, stroking his white beard. 'No doubt the nuts were given as a miserly payment of some service you did her.'

"No, no,' the angel answered decidedly.

"Well, tell us how it happened then,' the apostle commanded, and the dear little soul obeyed:

"My sick mother and I lived in the city all alone, for father was dead. Just before Christmas we had nothing more to eat. So mother, though she lay in bed and her head and hands were burning, made some little sheep of bits of wood and cotton and I carried them to the Christmas market. There I sat on some steps and offered them for sale to the passers-by; but nobody wanted them. Hours passed, and it was very cold; the open wound in my knee, which no one saw, pained me so, and the frost in my fingers and toes burned and itched dreadfully. Evening came, the lamps were lighted, but I dared not go home; for only one person had thrown a copper into my lap, and I needed more to buy a bit of bread and a few coals. My own pangs hurt me, but that mother lay at home alone, with no one to hand her anything, or support her when her breathing became difficult, hurt me still more. I could hardly bear to sit on the cold steps any longer, and my eyes were blind with tears. A barrel was set down in front of the house, and while a clerk was rolling it over the sidewalk into the shop, the stream of passers was stopped. That woman there—I remember her well—stood still in front of me. I offered her one of my sheep, and looked at her through my tears. She seemed so hard and stern, that I thought: 'She won't give me anything.' But she did. It seemed suddenly as if her face grew softer, and her eyes kinder. She glanced at me, and before I knew it, she had put her hand in the bag which she carried on her arm, and thrown the nuts into my lap. The cask had been rolled into the shop by this time, and the throng of people carried her along. She tried to stop. It was not easy, and she only did it to toss me a second, third, and fourth handful of the most beautiful

walnuts. I can still see it all, as if it were to-day! Then she felt in her pocket, probably to get some money for me, but the press of people was too strong for her to stand against it longer. I doubt if she heard that I thanked her.'

"Here the angel broke off, and threw a kiss to the condemned woman, and St. Peter asked her how it happened that she, who had been so deaf to all appeals from the poor, had been so sweetly generous to the child.

"The tormented woman answered amid her loud sobs: 'The tearful eyes of the little one reminded me of my small sister, who died a painful death before I had grown to be hard and wicked, and a strange sensation--I know not how it happened myself--overpowered me. It seemed as if my heart warmed within me, and something seemed to say to me that I would never forgive myself as long as I lived, and would be even unhappier than I was, if I did not give the child something to rejoice over at Christmas time. I longed to draw her towards me and kiss her. After I had tossed her half of the nuts, which I had just bought, I felt happier than I had for many a day, and I would certainly have given her some money, though only a little'

"But Peter interrupted her. He had heard enough, and as he knew that it was impossible for any one in Heaven or Hell to tell an untruth, he nodded to her, saying: 'That was, beyond dispute, a good deed, but it is too small to counterbalance the great weight of your bad deeds. Perhaps it may lighten your punishment. Still great riches were meted out to you on earth, and what were a few nuts to you! The motive that urged you to bestow them is pleasing in the sight of the Lord, I acknowledge; but as I said before, your charity was too paltry for you to be released from your pains because of it.'

"He turned to go, but a clear voice of wonderful sweetness held him back. It was that of the Saviour, who advanced with majestic dignity towards the apostle and spoke: 'Let us first hear if the alms-giving of which we have just learned was really too small to plead for leniency towards this sinning soul. Let us hear'--turning to the angel--'what became of the nuts.'

"'O dear Saviour,' answered the angel, 'I ate half of them, and I was grateful to you, for I felt that I owed them to your bounty as they were my 'little Christ child' as the people in the city where we lived called a Christmas present.'

"'You see, Peter,' the Saviour interrupted the angel. 'Do we not owe it to the nuts of that woman that a pure child's soul was led to us? That in itself is no small thing! Tell what further happened to you?'

"'I ate most of them,' the little girl answered, but I had still more to eat by Christmas-eve; for the people who had looked at me when the woman threw something into my lap were interested in my suffering, and soon I had sold all six sheep, and besides many pennies and groschen, one big thaler had flown into my lap. With these I was able to buy mother many things that she stood in sore need of, and, though she died on New Year's morning, she had had many little comforts during her last days.'

"The Anointed cast another look full of meaning at Peter, when a large and beautiful angel, the spirit of the mother of the cherub, began: 'If you will permit me, O, holy Jesus, I, too, would like to say a word in favor of the condemned. Before Hannele came home with the nuts, I lay in bed without hope, or help in my great suffering. I had lost all faith, for my prayers had not been heard, and in the bitterness of my heart, it seemed that you, who were said to be the friend of the poor on earth, and God the Father, had forgotten us in our misery, in order to overwhelm the rich with greater gifts. In my distress, and that of the child; I had learned to curse the day on which we were born. Oh! how wild were my thoughts during the time that Hannele was trying to sell the sheep, and did not come home; though I needed her so sorely. I was often so thirsty that my mouth burned as with fire, and the moments when I gasped for breath were frequent, and almost unbearable when no one was there to lift me up. I called those people liars who would persuade the poor that they had a merciful Father in Heaven, who looked upon them as his children, and cared for them. But when Hannele came home, and lighted the little lamp, and I saw her tiny face, where for a long time I had seen no smile, but only pain and grief, now beaming with joy, when I saw the nuts and the other good things which she had brought, and saw her pleasure in them, my belief in thee, O Lord, and in the kind Father returned, and I ceased not to be grateful to the end. If now, in the glory of thy magnificence, I know bliss unutterable, I owe it to that woman, and to the fact that she was good enough to throw the nuts into Hannele's apron.'

"Peter nodded affirmatively. Then he bowed before the Saviour and said: 'The little gift of the condemned soul has indeed borne better fruit than I imagined; yet when I tell you what a great sinner she was on earth....'

"'I know,' the Son of God interrupted him. 'Before we decide upon the fate of this woman, let us hear what the child did with the rest of the nuts, for we know that she did not eat them all. Now my little angel, what became of the last of them? Speak on. Gladly will I listen to you.'

"Hannele began anew: 'After they had buried mother, they sent me into the country among the mountains, for they said it was not the duty of the city to care for me, but that of the village parish, where my parents were born. So I was taken there. The six nuts that I had saved I took with me to play with. This I most enjoyed doing in the spring, alone on the little strip of grass behind the Poor-house, in which I was the only child. Besides me there were but three old women 'being fed to death,' as the peasants used to say. Two of my companions were blind, and the third was dull-witted and gazed ever straight before her. Not one of them noticed anything that happened around them, but my heart used to grow light when everything about me budded, and sprouted, and burst into bloom. My body was always aching but my pains could not lessen my enjoyment of the spring. Wherever I looked, men were sowing and planting. It was the first time that I had ever seen it, and the wish came over me to confide something to the good earth that would take root, and sprout, and grow green and high for me.

"So I stuck four of my nuts into the ground. I put them as far apart in the small space as I could, so that if big trees came from my seeds they might not stand in one another's way, but might all enjoy the air and the sunshine that I was so thankful for. I saw my seeds sprout, but what became of them afterwards I did not live to see. Two years after I sowed them a famine fell upon us. The poor weavers who lived in the mountain village had all they could do to nourish wife and child. There was little left for the Poor-house. As I was already ill I could not stand the misery, and I was the first to die of the dreadful fever caused by hunger. Only one of the blind women, and the dull-witted one followed the sack in which I was buried--for who would have paid for a coffin? The last two nuts I divided with the old women. Each one of us had a half, and how gladly we ate the little morsel, for even a taste of any dainty seemed good to us, after we had lived on nothing but bread and potatoes. From here I watched the other nuts grow to be trees. All four had straight stems and thick crowns. Under one of them that stood near a spring, which is now called the Fresh Spring, an old carpenter who came to the Poor-house built a bench.'

"Here another angel interrupted the little narrator with the question: 'Do you mean the nut-tree in Dorbstadt?' and, receiving an answer in the affirmative, he cried: 'I, Master, I am that old carpenter, and during my last summers, I had no greater pleasure than to sit by the Fresh Spring under the nut-tree, and while I smoked my pipe to think of my old wife, whom I was soon to find again with you. In the autumn, too, many a dry brown leaf found its way among the more expensive tobacco ones.'

"'And I,' cried a former peddler, breaking into the carpenter's story, 'I assuredly have not forgotten the nut-tree, where I always set down my pack when my shoulders were nearly broken, and under whose shade I used to rest my weary limbs before entering the village.'

"'I, too! How often have I stopped under the spreading branches of that tree on a hot summer day and found refreshment!' cried a former post-messenger of Dorbstadt. A porter who had also lived there added his praises.

"'But the nut-trees were cut down many years ago,' the latter added.

"'I saw it,' cried the spirit of little Hannele, and one heard from her tone how she deplored it. 'They were felled when the Poor-house was given up. 'But the great Son of God has now heard what he wished to know.'

"'No, no,' the Saviour answered, 'I should still like to know what became of the wood of these trees.'

"The voices of several angels were heard at the same moment, for many of the poor weavers of Dorbstadt were to be found in the Heavenly Kingdom. St. Peter, however, bade them to be quiet, and permitted only the one who had last entered the Abode of the Blessed to speak.

"'I was the village doctor,' this one began, 'and I quitted the earth because I, too, fell a victim to the pestilence of which many of the poor people were dying, and against which I fought with all my powers, but with small success. I can tell you all that you wish to know, my Master, for, during forty-five years, I devoted my humble services to the sick poor there. When Hannele died in our Poor-house--it happened before my time--the misery was even greater than at present. The weavers were ground down by the large manufacturers, until an energetic man built a factory in our village, and paid them better wages. As the population then increased, and consequently the number of patients, space was wanting in which to house them, for the dilapidated Poor-house--whither they were carried--was no longer large enough to accommodate them all. Therefore the parish, aided by the owner of the factory, built a hospital for the whole district, and the site of the old Poor-house was chosen for it. The beautiful nut-trees which Hannele had planted had to be destroyed. I was sorry to be obliged to give the order, but we needed the ground where they stood. As we had to be economical in everything, big and little, we had planks sawn out of the trees for our use.'

"At this point another spirit interrupted the physician. 'I have lain in one of the beds made from the wood. At home I slept on a bundle of straw, and very uncomfortable it was when I was shaken by the fever. In the hospital all was

different, and when I lay in my comfortable bed, I felt as if I were already in Heaven.'

"'And I,' cried another broad-winged angel, 'for ten years I walked with the crutches that were made for me from the nut-tree by the Fresh Spring, and old Conrad, below on the earth, is still using them.'

"'And mine also,' another continued, 'were of the same wood. I had lain for a long time on my back; but after I got them, I learned to walk with them and they enabled me to stand before the loom, and to earn bread once more for my family. That man yonder from Hochdorf has had the same experience, and the wooden leg of William, the toll-gate keeper, who entered here shortly before me, was made of wood from the nut-tree.'

"'I owe it a debt of gratitude, too, but for an entirely different service,' said a beautiful angel, as it bowed its crowned head reverently before the Son of God. 'My lot below was a very hard one. I was early left a widow, and I supported my children entirely by the work of my hands. By dint of great effort I brought them up well, and my three sons grew to be brave men, who took care of themselves, and helped their mother. But all three, my Master, were lost to me, taken away by the unfathomable wisdom of the Father. Two fell in war, the third was killed by the machinery while at his work. That broke my strength, and when they brought me to the hospital I was on the verge of despair, and life seemed a greater burden than I could bear. Your image, my Saviour, had just been finished by a sculptor, who had carved it from the wood of the nut-tree by the Fresh Spring. They put it up opposite to my bed. It represented you, my Lord, on the cross, and your head bowed in agony, with its crown of thorns, was a very sorrowful sight. Yet I paid but small heed to it. One morning, however--it was the anniversary of the death of my two dear sons, who had lost their lives, fighting bravely side by side for their Fatherland--on that morning the sun fell upon your sad face, and bleeding hands pierced by the nails, and then I reflected how bitterly you had suffered, though innocent, that you might redeem us, and how your mother must have felt to lose such a child. Then a voice asked me if I had any right to complain, when the Son of God himself had willingly endured such torments for our sake, and I felt compelled to answer no, and determined then to bear patiently whatever might be laid upon me, a poor, sinful woman. Thenceforth, my Lord, was your image my consolation and, since the wood of which it was made came from the tree planted by Hannele near the Fresh Spring, I owe beyond doubt the better years that followed, and the joy of being with you in Paradise, my Saviour, to the nuts which that condemned woman gave to the child.'

"Humbly she bowed her head again. The Son of God turned to St. Peter, saying: 'Well, Peter?'

"The latter called to the guardians of Hell: 'Let her go free, the gates of Heaven are open to her. How rich and manifold, O Lord! is the fruit that springs from the smallest gift offered in true love!'

"'You are right,' answered the Saviour, gently, and turned away."

The colonel had talked for a longer time than was allowed him by his doctor, and he needed rest. When he appeared again at supper time, in order to help us eat our Christmas carps, he found little Hermy standing with Karl and Kurt before the fire, and he noticed how his favourite's eyes rested with pleasure on the nuts which he had bought for his grandmother; and how the older boys, who were only too prone to tease their younger brother, treated him with a certain tenderness, as if they had something to make up for.

At table we overheard Kurt say to Karl: "Little Hermy's present for grandmother was not a bad idea," to which Karl answered quickly: "I am going to put away some of my nuts to-morrow, and plant them in the spring."

"To make a pair of crutches for me, or in order that you may go to Heaven?" asked the colonel.

The boy blushed, and could find no answer; but I came to his rescue, and replied: "No, his trees shall remind us of you, Colonel, and of your stories. When we give, we will, in remembrance of you, give in all love and willingness, and when we receive, even the smallest gift, we will only ask in what spirit it was offered."