

GEORG EBERS

THE NUTS: A
CHRISTMAS STORY FOR
MY CHILDREN AND
GRANDCHILDREN

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The wounded colonel, whom we were nursing back to health in our house, was not allowed to walk long, and in the after noon, 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 Hermy 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 Hermy was so evidently his darling that there was no further chance for Hermy'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 Hermy'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, Hermy 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, Hermy?"

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."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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