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[Illustration: TWO WAYS OF CARRYING THE MAIL. [See Letter-Box.]]

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THE RAVENS AND THE ANGELS.

(A Story of the Middle Ages.)

BY THE AUTHOR OF "CHRONICLES OF THE SCHOENBERG-COTTA FAMILY."

I.

In those old days, in that old city, they called the cathedral--and they thought it--the house of God. The cathedral was the Father's house for all, and therefore it was loved and honored, and enriched with lavish treasures of wealth and work, beyond any other father's house.

The cathedral was the Father's house, and, therefore, close to its gates might nestle the poor dwellings of the poor,--too poor to find a shelter anywhere besides; because the central life and joy of the house of God was the suffering, self-sacrificing Son of Man; and dearer to Him, now and forever, as when He was on earth, was the feeblest and most fallen human creature He had redeemed than the most glorious heavenly constellation of the universe He had made.

And so it happened that when Berthold, the stone-carver, died, Magdalis, his young wife, and her two children, then scarcely more than babes, Gottlieb and little Lenichen, were suffered to make their home in the little wooden shed which had once sheltered a hermit, and which nestled into the recess close to the great western gate of the minster.

Thus, while inside from the lofty aisles pealed forth, night and day, the anthems of the choir, close outside, night and day, rose also, even more surely to God, the sighs of a sorrowful woman and the cries of little children whom all her toil could hardly supply with bread. Because, He hears the feeblest wail of want, though it comes not from a dove or even from a harmless sparrow, but a young raven. And He does not heed the sweetest anthem of the fullest choir, if it is a mere pomp of sound. Because, while the best love of His meanest creatures is precious to Him, the second-best of His loftiest creatures is intolerable to Him. He heeds the shining of the drops of dew and the rustling of the blades of grass. But from creatures who can love he cannot accept the mere outside offering of creatures which can only make a pleasant sound.

All this, or such as this, the young mother Magdalis taught her babes as they could bear it.

For they needed such lessons.

The troubles of the world pressed on them very early, in the shape little children can understand--little hands and feet nipped with frost, hunger and darkness and cold.

Not that the citizens of that city were hypocrites, singing the praises of God, whilst they let His dear Lazaruses vainly crave at His gates for their crumbs.

But Magdalis was very tender and timid, and a little proud; proud not for herself, but for her husband and his babes. And she was also feeble in health. She was an orphan herself, and she had married, against the will of her kindred in a far-off city, the young stone-carver, whose genius they did not appreciate, whose labor and skill had made life so rich and bright to them while he lived, and whose early death had left them all so desolate.

For his dear sake, she would not complain. For herself it had been easier to die, and for his babes she would not bring the shame of beggary on them. Better for them to enter into this life maimed of

strength, she thought, by meager food, than tainted with the taint of beggary.

Rather, she thought, would their father himself have seen them go hungry to bed than deserve that the fingers of other children should be pointed scornfully at them as "the little beggars by the church door," the door of the church in which she gloried to think there were stones of his carving.

So she toiled on, carving for sale little devotional symbols--crosses, and reliquaries, and lilies and lambs--with the skill she had learnt from him, and teaching the little ones, as best she could, to love and work and suffer. Teaching them only, perhaps, not quite enough to hope. For the lamp of hope burnt low in her own heart, and therefore her patience, not being enough the patience of hope, lacked something of sweetness. It never broke downward into murmurs, but it too seldom soared upward into praise.

So it happened that one frosty night, about Christmas-tide, little Gottlieb lay awake, very hungry, on the ledge of the wall, covered with straw, which served him for a bed.

It had once been the hermit's bed. And very narrow Gottlieb thought it must have been for the hermit, for more than once he had been in peril of falling over the side, in his restless tossings. He supposed the hermit was too good to be restless, or perhaps too good for the dear angels to think it good for him to be hungry, as they evidently did think it good for Gottlieb and Lenichen, or they would be not good angels at all, not even as kind as the ravens which took the bread to Elijah when they were told. For the dear Heavenly Father had certainly told the angels always to take care of little children.

The more Gottlieb lay awake and tossed and thought, the further off the angels seemed.

For, all the time, under the pillow lay one precious crust of bread, the last in the house until his mother should buy the loaf to-morrow.

He had saved it from his supper in an impulse of generous pity for his little sister, who so often awoke, crying with hunger, and woke his poor mother, and would not let her go to sleep again.

He had thought how sweet it would be, when Lenichen awoke the next morning, to appear suddenly, as the angels do, at the side of the bed where she lay beside her mother, and say:

"Dear Lenichen! See, God has sent you this bit of bread as a Christmas gift."

For the next day was Christmas Eve.

This little plan made Gottlieb so happy that at first it felt as good to him as eating the bread.

But the happy thought, unhappily, did not long content the hungry animal part of him, which craved, in spite of him, to be filled; and, as the night went on, he was sorely tempted to eat the precious crust--his very

own crust--himself.

"Perhaps it was ambitious of me, after all," he said to himself, "to want to seem like a blessed angel, a messenger of God, to Lenichen. Perhaps, too, it would not be true. Because, after all, it would not be exactly God who sent the crust, but only me."

And with the suggestion, the little hands which had often involuntarily felt for the crust, brought it to the hungry little mouth.

But at that moment it opportunely happened that his mother made a little moan in her sleep, which half awakened Lenichen, who murmured, sleepily, "Little mother, mother, bread!"

Whereupon, Gottlieb blushed at his own ungenerous intention, and resolutely pushed back the crust under the pillow. And then he thought it must certainly have been the devil who had tempted him to eat, and he tried to pray.

He prayed the "Our Father" quite through, kneeling up softly in bed, and lingering fondly, but not very hopefully, on the "Give us our daily bread."

And then again he fell into rather melancholy reflections how very often he had prayed that same prayer and been hungry, and into distracting speculations how the daily bread could come, until at last he ventured to add this bit of his own to his prayers:

"Dear, holy Lord Jesus, you were once a little child, and know what it feels like. If Lenichen and I are not good enough for you to send us bread by the blessed angels, do send us some by the poor ravens. We would not mind at all, if they came from you, and were your ravens, and brought us real bread. And if it is wrong to ask, please not to be displeased, because I am such a little child, and I don't know better, and I want to go to sleep!"

Then Gottlieb lay down again, and turned his face to the wall, where he knew the picture of the Infant Jesus was, and forgot his troubles and fell asleep.

The next morning he was awaked, as so often, by Lenichen's little bleat; and he rose triumphantly, and took his crust to her bedside.

Lenichen greeted him with a wistful little smile, and put up her face for a kiss; but her reception of the crust was somewhat disappointing.

She wailed a little because it was "hard and dry," and when Gottlieb moistened it with a few drops of water, she took it too much, he felt, as a mere common meal, a thing of course, and her natural right.

He had expected that, in some way, the hungry hours it had cost him would have been kneaded into it, and made it a kind of heavenly manna for her.

To him it had meant hunger, and heroism, and sleepless hours of endurance. It seemed strange that to Lenichen it should seem nothing more than a hard, dry, common crust.

But to the mother it was much more.

She understood all; and, because she understood so much, she said little.

She only smiled, and said he looked more than ever like his father; and as he sat musing rather sadly while she was dressing, and Lenichen had fallen asleep again, she pointed to the little peaceful sleeping face, the flaxen hair curling over the dimpled arm, and she said:

"That is thy thanks--just that the little one is happy. The dear Heavenly Father cares more, I think, for such thanks than for any other; just to see the flowers grow, just to hear the birds sing to their nestlings, just to see His creatures good and happy, because of His gifts. Those are about the best thanks for Him and for us."

But Gottlieb looked up inquiringly.

"Yet He likes us to say 'Thank you,' too? Did you not say all the Church services, all the beautiful cathedral itself, is just the people's 'Thank you' to God? Are we not going to church just to say 'Thank you,' to-day?"

"Yes, darling," she said. "But the 'thank you' we mean to say is worth little unless it is just the blossom and fragrance of the love and content always in the heart. God cares infinitely for our loving Him, and loves us to thank Him if we do. He does not care at all for the thanks without the love, or without the content."

And as she spoke these words, Mother Magdalis was preaching a little sermon to herself also, which made her eyes moisten and shine.

So she took courage, and contrived to persuade the children and herself that the bread-and-water breakfast that Christmas Eve morning had something quite festive about it.

And when they had finished with a grace which Gottlieb sang, and Lenichen lisped after him, she told him to take the little sister on his knee and sing through his songs and hymns, while she arrayed herself in the few remnants of holiday dress left her.

And as she cleaned and arranged the tiny room, her heart was lighter than it had been for a long time.

"I ought to be happy," she said to herself, "with music enough in my little nest to fill a church."

When Gottlieb had finished his songs, and was beginning them over again, there was a knock at the door, and the face of old Hans, the dwarf, appeared at the door, as he half opened it.

"A good Christmas to thee and thy babes, Mother Magdalis! Thy son is born indeed with a golden spoon in his mouth," croaked old Hans in his hoarse, guttural voice.

The words grated on Magdalis. Crooked Hans' jokes were apt to be as

crooked as his temper and his poor limbs, and to give much dissatisfaction, hitting on just the sore points no one wanted to be touched.

She felt tempted to answer sharply, but the sweet Christmas music had got into her heart, and she only said, with tears starting to her eyes:

"If he was, neighbor, all the gold was lost and buried long ago."

"Not a bit of it!" rejoined Hans. "Didn't I hear the gold ring this very instant? The lad has gold in his mouth, I say! Give him to me, and you shall see it before night."

She looked up reproachfully, the tears fairly falling at what she thought such a cruel mockery from Hans, who knew her poverty, and had never had from her or hers the rough words he was too used to from every one.

"The golden days are over for me," was all she said.

"Nay! They have yet to begin," he replied. "Your Berthold left more debtors than you know, Frau Magdalis. And old Hans is one of them. And Hans never forgets a debt, black or white. Let the lad come with me, I say. I know the choir-master at the cathedral. And I know he wants a fine high treble just such as thy Gottlieb's, and will give anything for it. For if he does not find one, the Cistercians at the new convent will draw away all the people, and we shall have no money for the new organ. They have a young Italian, who sings like an angel, there; and the young archduchess is an Italian, and is wild about music, and lavishes her gifts wherever she finds it good."

Magdalis looked perplexed and troubled.

"To sell the child's voice seems like selling part of himself, neighbor," she said at length; "and to sell God's praises seems like selling one's own soul."

"Well, well! Those are thy proud burgher notions," said Hans, a little nettled. "If the Heavenly Father pleases to give thee and the little ones a few crumbs for singing His matins and evensong, it is no more than He does for the robins, or, for that matter, for the very ravens, such as me, that croak to Him with the best voice they have."

At these words, Gottlieb, who had been listening very attentively, gently set little Lenichen down, and, drawing close to Hans, put his little hand confidingly in his.

"I will go with neighbor Hans, mother!" he said, decisively. "The dear Lord himself has sent him."

"Thou speakest like a prophet," said the mother, smiling tenderly at his oracular manner, "a prophet and a king in one. Hast thou had a vision? Is thy will indeed the law of the land?"

"Yes, mother," he said, coloring, "the dear Lord Jesus has made it quite plain. I asked Him, if we were not good enough for Him to send us an angel, to send us one of His ravens, and He has sent us Hans!"

Hans laughed, but not the grim, hoarse laugh which was habitual to him, and which people compared to the croaking of a raven; it was a hearty, open laugh, like a child's, and he said:

"Let God's raven lead thee, then, my lad, and the mother shall see if we don't bring back the bread and meat."

"I did not ask for meat," said Gottlieb, gravely, "only for bread."

"The good God is wont to give more than we either desire or deserve," croaked Hans, "when He sets about giving at all."

II.

There was no time to be lost.

The services of the day would soon begin, and Hans had set his heart on Gottlieb's singing that very day in the cathedral.

The choir-master's eyes sparkled as he listened to the boy; but he was an austere man, and would not utter a word to make the child think himself of value.

"Not bad raw material," he said, "but very raw. I suppose thou hast never before sung a note to any one who understood music?"

"Only for the mother and the little sister," the child replied in a low, humbled tone, beginning to fear the raven would bring no bread after all, "and sometimes in the litanies and the processions."

"Sing no more for babes and nurses, and still less among the beggars in the street-processions," pronounced the master, severely. "It strains and vulgarizes the tone. And, with training, I don't know but that, after all, we might make something of thee--in time, in time."

Gottlieb's anxiety mastered his timidity, and he ventured to say:

"Gracious lord! if it is a long time, how can we all wait? I thought it would be to-day! The mother wants the bread to-day."

Something in the child's earnest face touched the master, and he said, more gently:

"I did not say you might not begin to-day. You must begin this hour, this moment. Too much time has been lost already."

And at once he set about the first lesson, scolding and growling about the child setting his teeth like a dog, and mincing his words like a fine lady, till poor Gottlieb's hopes more than once sank very low.

But, at the end of a quarter of an hour's practice, the artist in the choir-master entirely overcame the diplomatist.

He behaved like a madman. He took the child in his arms and hugged him, like a friendly bear; he set him on the table and made him sing one

phrase again and again, walking round and round him, and rubbing his hands and laughing with delight; and, finally, he seized him and bore him in triumph to the kitchen, and said to his housekeeper:

"Ursula, bring out the finest goose and the best preserves and puddings you have. We must feast the whole choir, and, may be, the dean and chapter. The archduke and the young archduchess will be here at Easter. But we shall be ready for them. Those beggarly Cistercians haven't a chance. The lad has the voice of an angel, and the ear--the ear--well, an ear as good as my own."

"The child may well have the voice of an angel," scolded old Ursula; "he is like to be among the angels soon enough."

For the hope, and the fear, and the joy had quite overcome the child, enfeebled as he was by meager fare; his lips were quite pale, and his cheeks.

Moreover, the last order of the choir-master had not been quite re-assuring to him. The fat goose and the puddings were good, indeed; but he would have preferred his mother and Lenichen being feasted in his honor, rather than the choir and the chapter.

And besides, though little more than seven years old, he was too much of a boy quite to enjoy his position on the master's shoulder. He felt it too babyish to be altogether honorable to the protector of Lenichen and incipient bread-winner of the family. And, therefore, he was relieved when he found himself once more safely on the ground.

But when Ursula set before him a huge plate of bread and meat, his manly composure all but gave way. It was more of an approach to a feast than any meal he had ever participated in, and he was nearly choked with repressed tears of gratitude.

It was so evident now that Hans was altogether an orthodox and accredited raven!

At first, as the child sat mute and wondering before the repast, with a beautiful look of joy and prayer in his blue eyes, Ursula thought he was saying his grace, and respected his devotion. But as the moments passed on, and still he did not attempt to eat, she became impatient.

"There is a time for everything," she murmured, at length. "That will do for thy grace! Now quick to the food! Thou canst finish the grace, if thou wilt, in music, in the church by and by."

But then the child took courage, and said:

"The ravens--that is, the good God--surely do not mean all this for me. Dear, gracious lady, let me run with the plate to the mother and Lenichen; and I will be back again in two minutes, and sing all day, if the master likes."

[Illustration: THE CHOIR-MASTER IS DELIGHTED WITH HIS NEW PUPIL.]

Ursula was much moved at the child's filial love, and also at his politeness.

"The little one has discrimination," she said to herself. "One can see he is of a good stock. He recognizes that I am no peasant, but the daughter of a good burgher house."

And, in spite of the remonstrances of her master, she insisted on giving the lad his way.

"I will accompany him, myself," said she.

And, without further delay or parley, she walked off, under the very eyes of the master, with the boy, and also with a considerable portion of his own dinner, in addition to the plate she had already set before Gottlieb.

\* \* \* \* \*

A very joyful and miraculous intervention it seemed to Mother Magdalis when Gottlieb re-entered the hermit's cell, under the stately convoy of the choir-master's housekeeper, and with food enough to feed the frugal little household for a week.

The two women greeted each other ceremoniously and courteously, as became two German housewives of good burgher stock.

"The little lad has manners worthy of a burgomaster," said Ursula. "We shall see him with the gold chain and the fur robes yet,--his mother a proud woman."

With which somewhat worldly benediction, she left the little family to themselves, conjuring Gottlieb to return in less than an hour, for the master was not always as manageable as this morning.

And when they were alone, Gottlieb was not ashamed to hide his tears on his mother's heart.

"See, darling mother!" he said, "the dear Savior did send the raven! Perhaps, one day, He will make us good enough for Him to send the angels."

Then the simple family all knelt down and thanked God from their hearts, and Gottlieb added one especial bit of his own of praise and prayer for his kind Hans, of whom, on account of his grim face and rough voice, he had stood in some dread.

"Forgive me, dear Lord Jesus," he said, "that I did not know how good he was!"

And when they had eaten their hasty Christmas feast, and the mother was smoothing his hair and making the best of his poor garments, Gottlieb said, looking up gravely in her face:

"Who knows, mother, if Hans is only a raven now, that the good God may not make him, his very self, the angel?"

"Perhaps God is making Hans into the angel even now," replied the mother.

And she remembered for a long time the angelic look of love and devotion in the child's eyes.

For she knew very well the cathedral choir was no angelic host.

She knew she was not welcoming her boy that morning to a haven, but launching him on a voyage of many perils. But she knew, also, that it is only by such perils, and through such voyages, that men, that saints, are made.

( \_To be continued.\_ )