



The Christmas Sand Clock

—1— Preparations

Count Helmut von Steinhausen lived with his wife, the countess, outside the city of Winkitz, Germany. The count's castle overlooked his fruitful vineyards on the gentle slopes of Saxony. Under his protection were some 20,000 people in surrounding villages.

It was early December, a time when the count usually met with his advisors to take stock of what had been accomplished that year and to plan for the coming year. Many problems faced them—the biggest one was whether they would escape Napoleon's

armies. Would their tiny land also be swallowed by the war spreading through Europe?

One of his advisors asked nervously, "How will we pay for an army to defend ourselves?"

Another suggested, "You must raise taxes on the villagers to pay for an army."

"That I will not do," the count replied. "The villagers have enough burdens."

"But sire, our coffers are dangerously low."

"God has blessed me with fertile vineyards that produce good table wine. I live comfortably off the sale of my wine. God has given me riches to share—not to hoard."

"But Count Steinhausen, this is not good business sense!"

"Haven't you read in the Bible about the rich fool who built bigger barns, then lost it all in one night? My life's philosophy is summed up in the verse: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

“Enough business talk! We must begin our preparations for the Christmas party! Have the village elders given you the guest list yet?”

“Not yet,” one counselor replied. “But I could supply you with a list of the wealthiest families in our realm.”

“We will do as we have always done and invite the orphans, the disadvantaged, the disabled, and the poor.”

“If I may ask, how will you benefit by inviting them?”

“Jesus told us to invite not our family or rich friends to our feasts, but the poor and handicapped,” the count explained.

“Yes, but...”

“Then God Himself will reward us! So, you see, it is good business after all,” the count said with a laugh.

The castle became a beehive of activity in preparation for the grand Christmas celebration. The count’s wife directed the servants in their preparations. Banners of green were draped, the brass fittings were polished, apple and mince cakes were baked, a large evergreen tree was placed in the ballroom, and the castle was cleaned from the roof to the basement.

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The Christmas Party

It was Christmas Day, and the courtyard was filled with the sound of excited children.

A trumpet sounded and a herald announced, “The people have arrived.”

The count stood at the door. “Show them in!” he called. The massive oak doors were opened, and the children filed in, bowing to the count and countess as they entered.

After everyone had arrived, the count called for the festivities to begin, and the band of minstrels played lively tunes.

The count led his wife by the hand onto the dance floor. Everyone lined up behind them for the toe-and-heel dance. The boys danced in an outside circle surrounding the girls on the inside. Soon they made a procession that wove around the room, and then danced through a human tunnel made by everyone grasping each other’s raised hands.

Games and all kinds of other festive merriment followed.

Then it was time to open the presents. The count climbed on the raised platform and tapped on a glass to get everyone’s attention. After the room quieted, he spoke. “Merry Christmas, everyone! I would like to offer a blessing for you—may your gifts be as a precious diamond or ruby, so that wherever you go, you will bring light to others. May your gifts supply all your needs and bring you before great men. May you experience the joy of giving, so you may prosper and be blessed. Amen.”

A curly-haired eight-year-old boy named Gunter was the first to





*Use me to bring joy to life,
Release the shape sleeping in the wood.
Use your talent only for the good.*

"Hmm ... a woodcarving set?" he asked.

Unable to wait a second longer, the boy tore open the paper. In the package was a fine set of tools.

"Gunter," said the count, "I have written a letter to the village woodcarver, and he's expecting you. I've arranged for a carriage to come pick you up, as I have done for other boys from your orphanage. My driver will take you to the woodcarver's shop, where you will learn how to use these tools. After you've learned how to carve, perhaps you can make a nativity scene, or a small piece of furniture, or a small toy, and then give it to someone who would enjoy such a gift. That will be a good way to make friends and to reach out to those around you, don't you think?"

"Th-thank you, sire!"

"And if you keep at it, eventually you will become a skilled woodcarver."

The count looked around the hall. "Is there a Hans Adam here?"

A seven-year-old boy with blond hair and deep blue eyes came forward, hobbling on crutches.

"I'm Hans, sire."

"It's your turn. Can you guess from this riddle what's inside your present?"

He read:

We are like the colors of a rainbow;
Share beauty you've seen
So others feel what you know.
May your vision be keen.

Hans tore at the wrapping paper without even trying to guess. "A paint set! Oh, thank you!"

The count added, "When you have finished your first painting, please show it to the master painter in town. He can help you with guidance and instruction."

The count noticed that Hans' nose was running and bent down to wipe it with his handkerchief.

"You poor child. You are developing a cold! You must dress more warmly."

The count ordered extra clothes and blankets to be prepared and sent back with the children when they returned to the orphanage.

As the evening went on, each child was called up and given a present.

The count then called the villagers over to him. "Good villagers, I have not forgotten you. I would like to give you these cuttings from my famous vineyard. My gardeners have carefully prepared a cutting for each of

approach the count. "Do you have a present for me?"

"Gunter? Oh yes, let's see. Here it is," said the count as he handed a package to Gunter. "But before you open it, read the label for us. It's a riddle in a poem and a clue for what is inside this present."

The boy read in a loud, clear voice.
I'm straight as a knife.

you,” the count said, as he motioned to the head gardener, who began distributing the vines to each of the men.

— 3 — All to Ruins

And so they enjoyed many Christmases in this way, until the day that disaster struck. It was the head gardener who announced the news, running into the courtyard, out of breath. “Master, the invading army is approaching!”

The count was startled. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Napoleon’s army. The Prussian army is burning everything in its path to prevent the enemy from getting any food or help! Our vines will certainly be turned to ashes. What can we do?”

“At least we must not let the palace be burned down. Get as many men as you need, and work with them to clear an area far enough away so that the fire will not be able to reach us as long as the wind is in our favor.

”Everybody worked furiously, pulling up vines and clearing an area around the palace with shovels and pickaxes.

The fire caught quickly on the vines and spread down the vineyard rows like a fire-breathing dragon, consuming everything in its way.

After the fire had at last died out, the count went into his vineyard to assess the damage. At the sight of his scorched vines, the count became depressed.

“All that we have worked for—it’s all gone! All of my precious vines!”

As he stood there, he remembered a comforting passage from the Bible:



Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in Thee: yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast. My soul is among lions: and I lie even among them that are set on fire, even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword. My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise (Psalm 57:1,4,7 KJV).

The conquering army soon left in retreat. In the months that followed, the count and countess had to sell their family treasures and heirlooms to survive. Gradually, as money became scarce, the castle fell into disrepair.

One day, the gardener reported to the count, “The ballroom is not doing well. The roof has holes in it.”

“How bad?”

“It’s great for the pigeons that have made it their nesting place. However, I’m afraid it will have to be closed. The plaster is cracked, and the walls are crumbling. We could start a mushroom farm with all of the fungi thriving in the recesses from the leaks and...”

“I appreciate your sense of humor. Seeing as there is no money for repairs, I suppose we will have to board up the

ballroom. Which reminds me—I'll have to dismiss the servants today. I'm afraid we can't afford their services any longer. I'm sorry to say this, dear friend, but I'll have to let you go too."

"Please, sire, don't worry about that! I'll stay on anyway."

"But why would you want to?"

"There is more to do now than ever. I can't leave this beautiful place to ruin. Besides, it's nice to know that I'm needed."

Several months passed. One day the count heard banging and asked the gardener, "What is all that noise?"

"Just fixing the leaks in the ballroom roof."

"Perhaps I'll come and take a look."

"I wouldn't recommend it, sire. It is much too dangerous!"

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A New Kind of Christmas

The first Christmas since the tragedy was fast approaching, and the count was discussing with his wife what they could do for this magical holiday.

"One thing is certain," said the countess, as she dragged her stool nearer

to their stove where they were burning a small pile of sticks that they had gathered in an attempt to cook and stay warm. "We cannot have the children here at Christmas this year."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because we have nothing to give them," she said. "We have nothing for them to eat, nothing to put on a tree, and no money to buy presents."

"True. But there were a few apple trees that escaped the fire. We could give some of our apples to the children—and singing doesn't cost anything."

"If you have made up your mind," she said, placing an arm about his shoulders, "then I will support this decision."

"God will provide for us!" he replied with a chuckle.

But as the count lay in bed that night, he thought, I am getting old. There aren't many more Christmases left for me. Perhaps this is my last Christmas. Please help me to make the children happy one more time, as I have done in the past.

The next day, the count invited the children as he had always done, but explained in a letter:

"This Christmas will be different from past celebrations in our castle. Unfortunately, due to the great fire, we

will not be able to give any presents. But that won't stop us from having a joyous celebration of Christ's birth in song. Please come and celebrate it with us."

As Christmas Day dawned bright and white, Count Steinhausen and his wife heard a noise in the distance. The countess looked out the window to see where it was coming from.

She said excitedly to the count, "They are coming! It's the children you invited, and what appears to be the whole village with them!"

"What? I know I invited them, but I did not expect that many to come this year since they know our state..."

"Come to the window and look for yourself!"

"Yes, I see them. And I hear them too—there is a band of musicians leading them, and they are all dancing to a rousing tune! Get the gardener! Throw open the gate, and let's meet our guests!"

Soon the courtyard echoed with cheerful greetings of "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas, everyone!"

"Come in, my dears!" the count cried out to the children. "I am glad to see you. I wasn't expecting so many of you. I am afraid there is not much room for all of you. You see, the ballroom is under repair."

"Please let us in, good Count! The ballroom! To the ballroom!" they insisted.

"All right then, but don't expect too much. I have not been able to repair the ballroom for lack of money."

Before he could say more, they had begun to push open the doors.

To his surprise, as they led him in by the hand, he saw that in the middle of the ballroom was a huge Christmas tree. He was amazed to find many presents underneath it. Everything was in perfect

repair; the roof had been repaired, and even the floor shone with polish.

"Who is responsible for this?" the count asked. "Why, the ballroom looks even better than it did before!"

"Some of the boys that you gave tools to decided to return your favor," the gardener said, pointing to his apprentices.

"So this is what you have been up to! However did you manage it?"

"We worked on it while you were away last week, visiting the poor in the nearby village," the gardener explained.

"I am astounded!" the count exclaimed. "Thank you!" Then he turned to the others, "Where did you get this tree?"

"The forest gave it to us, and we who love you give it to you!" they shouted with glee.

He looked around at all of the beaming faces and began hugging as many as he could. "My heart is too full of joy to speak."

As they led him by the hand closer to the tree, the count was surprised to discover that all the packages were for him and his wife. Each time he opened a present, all the children clapped and cheered.

It took a long time to look at all the unusual presents. In the packages were

each of the family treasures that the count and countess had had to sell in order to get by.

The couple could not hold back their tears another moment, but there was more. One boy put a specially wrapped package in his hand with a note saying, "From All the Villagers of Winkitz."

"We wanted to give you this sand clock for the years you have cared for and helped us, especially on Christmas Day," said the messenger boy awkwardly as he read his carefully prepared speech.

Everyone cheered and clapped.

"Read the inscription on the bottom!" one of the children shouted.

The count read out loud:

Life is a sand clock of
rich and poor;

The sand flows not in vain.

It is turned over and
filled once more—

What you give returns again.

It was the most wonderful Christmas the count had ever had. As usual there was dancing and an abundance of games and a fine feast from the food everyone had brought. There were splendid pies, great bowls of jelly, and tremendous fruitcakes for all to satisfy their appetites.



“To the joy of giving!” everyone shouted, raising their glasses in a toast.

After singing around the tree, all the children came up, and each in turn said, “Merry Christmas!” Before they marched off home again, they had one more surprise for him. “Look on your windowsill, good Count.”

On the windowsill was a cutting from a vine. “What is this?” the count asked.

One of the villagers explained, “We have nurtured the small vine cuttings that you gave, and now they have grown to become fruitful vines. And so, from their cuttings, come spring we will plant them in your vineyard, and your vineyard will be reborn. In a few years, you will be producing the best wine in Germany once more—you’ll see!”

After everyone was gone, the count and countess shared a moment of quiet together, “My, my, what a happy Christmas this has been!”

The countess replied, “May you have many more, my dear!”

And so they did.

Just as the sand clock turns over and is filled once more, what they’d given had come back again.



S&S link: Character Building: Values and Virtues: Generosity-2a

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