

UNDER THE EVENING LAMP

THE STORY OF A POOR SCHOLAR.

BY D. ALLOCK, AUTHOR OF "THE SPANISH BROTHERS," ETC.

CHAPTER III.

The consciousness of life came back to Wenzel only as consciousness of pain. Never had he felt such pain before; never had he dreamed such pain was possible, even to martyrs at the stake, to whom his first confused thoughts wandered vaguely. The first words he heard, so as to understand them, were these, "Badly burned, and his arm broken in two places. He fell through the burning roof to the floor. Poor child!"

Well, then, if he was so badly hurt, could they not leave him in peace, and not put him to more pain, touching and handling him? He felt aggrieved, but was too weak to be angry, or indeed to be anything but very tired.

There followed a long time—was it a whole lifetime? of pain and weariness, never ceasing, rarely lessening, though it was broken, and more and more frequently, by intervals of uneasy slumber. He knew that he was given things to drink, chiefly soup or wine; and that sometimes bread was dipped in the wine, and put in his mouth. Forms flitted about him, but he recognized no one. By-and-by he began to dream. He was at Kolin, at Melnik—he was with his father and mother, or his cousins. They spoke to him, and he answered—aloud, as he thought, though in truth his words were but a broken whisper. Still they made some one who came to see him say gravely, "He is wandering."

"And why not?" he said, trying to raise himself. "I am a wandering scholar." But the pain the effort cost him made his words end in a cry.

"A good sign," said the voice again. "He may do yet."

Then he heard the noise of heavy footsteps retreating. His sharp pain died away, gradually, into a dull ache, and he fell asleep. The sound of a sob aroused him. A little girl sat beside him weeping bitterly. He thought he ought to know her, but could not in the least remember who she was. "She will think me very discourteous, if I speak to her without knowing her name," he thought, the instincts of his knightly breeding asserting themselves, while so much else lay dormant. "Still, I can't bear to see her crying so. Dear maiden," he said, as nearly aloud as he could speak, "why do you weep?"

"Dear Master Wenzel," she answered in a broken voice, "have I not enough to weep for, when I see you lying there suffering all these long weeks, and all for me?"

"All for you? I do not understand. Pray excuse me. What has happened?"

"Why? Don't you know? Goodman Grobman's house was burned, down to the very ground. They say it was the old wood of the chimney took fire first, and nobody knew. Maybe—I cannot tell. It was all built of old dry wood; and then the straw—you know. So it burned up like tinder; and no man there to help, save the old grandfather and the little lad of ten, and you, Master Wenzel, whom God bless." Here the tears flowed again and stopped the story.

"What did I do? I don't remember."

"You don't remember, Master Wenzel," said the little maid, now fairly choking with her sobs, "but there is One who does. It is in the Holy Gospels."

"In the Holy Gospels? Now you are puzzling me more than ever," said Wenzel, half fretful in his weakness.

The girl caught her breath, calmed herself, a little, and repeated reverently, "'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these——' Master Wenzel, I'm not 'one of the least,' I'm the very least of all. Fatherless, motherless, only a little servant, taken in by kind people, for the love of God—Gretchen, the goose-girl. And so I'm very sure He will say to you, 'You did it unto Me.'"

Something came into Wenzel's weary eyes that stung them with a sudden pain; and yet he felt the better for it. He began now to remember the past.

After a long pause he said, "And yet I did not think of Him—then."

"Master, that is not in the Holy Gospel. It does

not say, 'Inasmuch as ye thought of Me,' but 'As ye did it unto these.' But I am sure He thought of you."

"What happened to me?" asked Wenzel.

"You broke the woodwork with an axe, that I might get out; and I did. I leaped, or fell down, I know not how; but they caught me, and I was only hurt a very little. But you fell right through the roof and the loft, down to the burning floor beneath. Then said old Father Fritz, 'The brave lad shan't die for us;' and he went in, and dragged you out somehow."

"Was he hurt?"

"No. He says you were just at the door. But for all that, he is ten years older since that night. The neighbors all around were very kind, and have taken us in, until Hans Grobman can rebuild his house which he is doing as fast as he can. You are in the house of the largest farmer in these parts, one Jonas Speyer. His people have tended you, and Mother Grobman let me come to help. Because—she nearly broke down again—"because you saved me. And if you had died, it would have been for me."

"Gretchen, am I like to die?"

"For a long time, Master Wenzel, every one thought you would. But now, I hope—I think—God will let you live. Oh, I pray to Him for you night and day!"

Was it a good prayer which that loving little heart sent up for her preserver's life? Wenzel began to think it was, when every day found him a little better, a little stronger; when pain, though still severe and frequent, became rather a visitor than a constant companion. In the first days of spring, when the earth was beginning to feel the throbbings of a life ever young and ever new, life seemed to be returning also to him. He looked out at the sunshine, and said, with a thrill of hope, "I shall be better soon. I will go forth and sit in the sun. Then, by-and-by, I shall grow strong again, and go on my journey to Wittenberg."

He was still at the farm; although Grobman's cottage was now rebuilt, all his friends thought he could be better cared for in the larger dwelling, where there was more room, and more comfort in every way. The little goose-girl had long since gone back to her duties, but she came to see him whenever she could, and so did the rest of the family. Grandfather Fritz was a frequent visitor, having more leisure than the rest, as his toiling days were well-nigh over. He used to read the Bible, or some book of Dr. Luther's, for Wenzel, until he was strong enough to read for himself; and quite a friendship sprang up between the old man and the boy.

It was Grandfather Fritz who, at Wenzel's earnest request, first led his tottering footsteps into the open air. The boy had been eager to go out; but he had not taken half a dozen steps when he felt his weakness, and was glad to sink down on the bench on the sunny side of the house.

"I am afraid I shall have to wait awhile before going to Wittenberg," he said, looking up with a wistful smile in the old man's pitying face.

"My son, that will be as God wills."

The sun was warm, yet Wenzel felt chilled, and soon asked to go in. It was many a day before he passed the door again. His frame had been too weak to resist the outer air; he caught cold, and it settled in the shattered arm, which was racked with rheumatic pains. Then something like a low fever, the result of all he had gone through, set in.

The kindly, though not very skilful doctor, who had set the fractured arm, was called in again to deal with this serious relapse.

"Poor boy!" said he. "He has made a brave struggle for his life; but——" An expressive gesture finished the sentence.

"Then, doctor, you think he will die?" said another voice, just outside the door of Wenzel's room.

"As to that, I know not. What I know is, 'twere best he should, for himself and for others. That hand of his will never raise bread to his lips again, not to talk of using the scholar's pen. And the rest of him——"

Wenzel, who had heard, so far, what was never meant for his ear, heard no more. With a moan as of one whose heart is broken, he turned his face to the wall and wept.

No one knew what he had heard, so no one tried comfort him. He told no one his trouble—he had