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Simplicius Simplicissimus

PART ONE

I

SIMPLICIUS TELLS OF HIS YOUTH

IN OUR CENTURY – and many believe it may be the last – there is a craze, among common people who have saved enough to afford a new-fashioned costume with silk ribbons, of pretending to be lordly masters and noblemen of very old descent. But if you look closer, you will find their forbears were hirelings or carriers; their cousins donkey drivers, their brothers beadles, bum-bailiffs; their sisters whores, and their mothers procuresses or even witches. In short, their whole lineage of all thirty-two forbears is somewhat sullied and besmirched. Indeed these new noblemen are often as black as if they had been born and bred in Guinea.

I do not want to put myself on the same level with such foolish people, although to tell the truth I often imagine that I too have my origin from a great lord, or at least from a lesser nobleman, for by my nature I was always inclined to exercise the craft of a gentleman. Seriously, my descent and education can well be compared with that of a prince. My dad – that is the name given to a father in the Spessart mountains – had his own palace, the like of which no king could build for himself. It was made of loam, and instead of infertile slates, cold lead or red copper, it was thatched with straw grown from the noble corn. The wall surrounding his castle was not built of quarry stones which can be found on the road, even less made with untidy bricks as other lords used, but was of oak wood – that useful, lofty tree bearing sausages and fat hams, and which needs more than a hundred years to reach its maturity. Where is the monarch who can do as well? His rooms and halls and chambers were blackened inside by smoke, for this is the most constant colour in the world, and such painting needs for its completion more time than a painter gives to his most magnificent works of art. The tapestries were of the tenderest tissues in the world, for they were woven by the master spider who once competed with Minerva herself. His windows were dedicated to St No-Glass, for they were covered with linen, which takes for its making more time and labour than the most transparent glass of Murano. Instead of pages, lackeys and stable hands, he had sheep, goats and pigs, everything orderly

dressed in its natural livery. Often they offered their service to me in the fields, until I tired of it and chased them homewards. The armoury was sufficiently stocked with ploughs, axes, hoes, shovels, forks for dung and hay, and every day my dad practised in the use of these weapons. Hoeing and ploughing was his military discipline; to yoke the oxen was his duty as a captain. To cart away the dung was his method of fortification, and tilling the land his campaign; chopping wood his daily exercise, clearing the manure from the stables his noble entertainment and his tournament. With all this he held his own in his world and gained at each harvest rich reward. I do not praise myself for all of that, lest anyone should ridicule me as a new nobleman. I do not pretend to be better than my dad. His abode was in a pleasant place, namely in the Spessart mountains, where the wolves bid each other goodnight.

According to the lordly custom of the house, my education developed. When I was ten years of age, I already understood my dad's gentlemanly exercises. In figures, however, I could hardly count up to five, because my dad followed the usage of present times, when noble people do not bother much about studies and school pranks, as they have servants to do this drudgery. Besides, I was an accomplished musician on the bagpipes, with which I could play melodies so pleasant that I almost outdid the famous Orpheus. Concerning theology, I do not think that there was anybody of my age in the whole of Christendom that could be compared with me: I knew neither God nor men, neither Heaven nor Hell, neither angel nor devil, and knew not how to distinguish between good and evil. Thus I lived as our first parents in Paradise, who in their innocence knew just as little of illness, death and dying as of the resurrection. Oh, happy life! You could well say, "life of an ass"! Yes, I was so complete and perfect in my ignorance that it was impossible for me to know that I knew nothing. I say it again: oh, happy life that I led then! But my dad did not want me to enjoy such happiness any longer, and thought it proper that I should live and work to the standards of my noble birth; so he began to guide me to higher things and give me more difficult lessons.

He installed me with the most glorious dignity not only of his own rural court, but of the world – that is, with the profession of a shepherd. Firstly he entrusted me with his sows, secondly with his goats, and lastly with his whole herd of sheep, so that I should care for them, shepherd them and protect them from the wolf through the sound of my bagpipe. Well could I be compared with David, only that he instead of bagpipes had a harp. My investiture was a good omen that I should become in

time a world-famous man, if good fortune blessed me, because from the beginning of time great men were often shepherds. We can read in the Holy Scriptures of Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his son, and even Moses himself, who shepherded the sheep of his brother-in-law before he became the leader and lawgiver over six hundred thousand men in Israel. Of course you could say that these were holy men of God and no peasant boy from the Spessart who knew nothing of God, but who could blame my innocence? Even among the old heathens we find such examples as we do with God's chosen people. Romulus and Remus were shepherds, and so was Spartacus, before whom the whole Roman might trembled. Shepherds they were all: Paris, King Priam's son, and Anchises, father of the Trojan prince Aeneas, the handsome Endymion, for whom the chaste Diana fretted, and the horrible Polyphemus. Yes, even the gods themselves were not ashamed of this profession; Apollo was cowherd to King Admetus, Mercury, his son Daphnis, Pan and Proteus were arch-shepherds, and are still the shepherds' patrons. The Jew, Philo, rightly speaks about this: "The work of a shepherd is a beginning and a preparation for governing, for as a warlike nature is best trained and exercised through hunting, so should he who is destined to govern be first educated in the pleasant and friendly duties of a shepherd." All this my dad must have had in his mind, and that is why even up to this hour he has given me great hopes of my future glory.

To come back to my herd, however, you should understand that I knew the wolf just as little as I knew my own ignorance. Therefore my dad continued more eagerly with his admonishments: "Boy, work hard! Don't let the sheep run away from each other. Play loudly on your bagpipe so that the wolf doesn't come and do damage, for he is a four-legged rogue and thief, devouring man and beast; if you are lazy I will beat your buttocks!"

I answered with equal charm: "Dad, can you tell me what the wolf looks like? I have never seen a wolf."

"Oh, you clumsy head of an ass," he replied, "you will stay a fool all your life. I wonder what will become of you. You are already such a big dunce and don't know yet what kind of a four-legged rogue the wolf is."

He gave me still more advice and at last became angry so that he went away grumbling. For he thought that my dull brain could not grasp his delicate indoctrination.

But I began to make such a noise with my bagpipe that one could have poisoned the toads in the kitchen-garden, and so I felt safe enough from the wolf who was always in my mind. And because my mum (so the mothers in

the Spessart and Vogelsberg are called) told me she was afraid the chickens might die of my singing, so I liked to sing to make my magic against the wolf the stronger. I sang a song which I had learnt from my mum herself:

You peasant-folk, though much despised,
 Deserve to be most greatly prized,
 No man can set your worth too high
 Who looks on you with honest eye.

What kind of world would be revealed
 If Adam had not tilled the field?
 By hoeing earth the man is fed
 From whom a princely line is bred.

The produce of the fruitful soil
 Must everywhere await your toil,
 The nourishment of all the land
 Is first provided by your hand.

The Emperor, whom God ordained
 As our Defender, is maintained
 By cottars' work, and soldiering bands
 Live on the plunder of your lands.

Yours is the meat on which we dine
 And yours the hand that prunes the vine;
 The earth must feel your ploughman's tread
 Before she blesses us with bread.

How desolate the earth would be,
 Untended by your husbandry;
 What sorrows would beset the place
 Uncheered by any country face!

Therefore we rightly honour you
 Upon whose nourishment we grew.
 Nature bestows her loving praise
 And God has blessed your rural ways.

You hear no country-folk complain
 Of bitter gout's reproachful pain,
 But often enough it must beget
 A rich man's death, a lord's regret.

You in your innocence are free
 Of our new age's vanity,
 And lest you ever fall from grace
 God gives you greater griefs to face.

The worst that soldiers can commit
 Still works towards your benefit;
 Lest pride take hold of you by stealth
 They say: We claim your worldly wealth!

Here I ended my song, for I and my whole herd of sheep were surrounded almost in one moment by a troop of cuirassiers who, lost in the great forest, had found their way back through my music.

“Oho!” I thought. “These are the fellows – here are those four-legged rogues and thieves of whom my dad told me!”

For at first I considered horse and man – as once the Mexicans the Spanish cavalry – to be one single creature and did not doubt they must be wolves. Therefore I wanted to frighten these horrible centaurs and drive them away. But as soon as I had blown up my bagpipe to such purpose, one of them grabbed me by the arm and slung me with such vehemence onto a farm-horse which they had just looted, that I tumbled down again on the other side onto my beloved bagpipe. Whereupon the pipe started to wail horribly and to make such a mournful sound as if it wanted to move the whole world to compassion. But it was of no avail: although my pipe did not spare its last breath to mourn my misery, I was forced onto the horse again. God knows what my bagpipe had sung and uttered – but my greatest worry was that the horsemen pretended that I had hurt my bagpipe whilst falling on it, and that was the reason why it had made such an unholy noise. Fantastic ideas then raced through my mind, for while I was sitting on this animal, which I had never before seen, I imagined I would be turned into a man of iron, for I thought those who led me away to be entirely of iron. But as such a change did not happen, I concluded in my stupid mind that these strange creatures had come only for the purpose of helping me to drive my sheep home, inasmuch as no one had devoured a sheep.

We all trotted directly to my dad's farm and I looked out for my dad and my mum expecting them to come out to bid us welcome. But in vain! He and my mum as well as our Ursula, who is my dad's only daughter, had run away through the back-door, not wishing to await these guests.

Although it was not my intention to lead these riders to my dad's farm, truth demands that I leave to posterity the cruelties committed in this our German war, to prove these evils were done to our advantage. Who else would have told me there was a God in Heaven if the warriors had not destroyed my father's house and forced me, through my captivity, to meet other people, for till this moment I had imagined my dad, mum and the rest of our household to be the sole inhabitants of this earth, as no other man nor human dwelling were known to me but the one where I daily went in and out. Soon I had to learn man's origin in this world. I was merely a human in shape and a Christian only in name, otherwise just an animal. Our gracious God looked upon my innocence with pity and wished to bring me both to his and my awareness, and although there were a thousand ways of doing this, he used the one by which my dad and mum were punished as an example to others for their careless education of me.

The first thing that the riders did was to stable their horses. After that each one started his own business which indicated nothing but ruin and destruction. While some started to slaughter, cook and fry, so that it looked as though they wished to prepare a gay feast, others stormed through the house from top to bottom as if the golden fleece of Colchis were hidden there. Others again took linen, clothing and other goods, making them into bundles as if they intended going to market; what they did not want was broken up and destroyed. Some stabbed their swords through hay and straw as if they had not enough pigs to stab. Some shook the feathers out of the beds and filled the ticks with ham and dried meat as if they could sleep more comfortably on these. Others smashed the ovens and windows as if to announce an eternal summer. They beat copper and pewter vessels into lumps and packed the mangled pieces away. Bedsteads, tables, chairs and benches were burnt although many stacks of dried wood stood in the yard. Earthenware pots and pans were all broken, perhaps because our guests preferred roasted meats, or perhaps they intended to eat only one meal with us. Our maid had been treated in the stable in such a way that she could not leave it any more – a shameful thing to tell! They bound the farm-hand and laid him on the earth, put a clamp of wood in his mouth, and emptied a milking churn full of horrid dung water into his belly. This they called the Swedish drink, and they forced him to lead a party of

soldiers to another place, where they looted men and cattle and brought them back to our yard. Among them were my dad, my mum and Ursula.

The soldiers now started to take the flints out of their pistols and in their stead screwed the thumbs of the peasants, and they tortured the poor wretches as if they were burning witches. They put one of the captive peasants into the baking-oven and put fire on him, although he had confessed nothing. Then they tied a rope round the head of another one, and twisted it with the help of a stick so tightly that blood gushed out through his mouth, nose and ears. In short, everybody had his own invention to torture the peasants and each peasant suffered his own martyrdom. My dad alone appeared to me the most fortunate, for he confessed with laughter what others were forced to say under pains and miserable lament, and such honour was done to him without doubt because he was the master of the house. They put him next to a fire, tied him so that he could move neither hands nor feet, and rubbed the soles of his feet with wet salt, which our old goat had to lick off. This tickled him so much that he almost wanted to burst with laughter, and it seemed to me so gentle and pleasant – for I had never seen nor heard my dad making such long-lasting laughter – that I half in companionship and half in ignorance joined heartily with him. In such merriment he confessed his guilt and revealed the hidden treasure, which was richer in gold, pearls and jewels than might have been expected of a peasant. What happened to the captive women, maids and daughters I do not know, as the soldiers would not let me watch how they dealt with them. I only very well remember that I heard them miserably crying in corners here and there, and I believe my mum and our Ursula had no better fate than the others.

In the midst of this misery I turned the spit and did not worry, as I hardly understood what all this meant. In the afternoon I helped to water the horses and so found our maid in the stable looking amazingly dishevelled. I did not recognize her but she spoke to me with pitiful voice:

“Oh, run away, boy, or the soldiers will take you with them. Look out, escape! Can’t you see how evil...”

More she could not say.

Escape, but where to? My mind was much too weak to find a plan but towards evening I succeeded in escaping into the woods. Where to now? The roads and the woods were to me as little known as the straits through the frozen sea beyond Nova Zembla* which lead to China. Although the deep black night enveloped me, it seemed to my frightened mind not dark enough. So I hid myself in some dense bushes where I still could hear the

cries of the tortured peasants and the song of the nightingale. Thus I laid myself carelessly down and fell asleep.

When the morning star in the East started to flicker I saw my dad's house in flames but nobody to quench them. I crawled out hoping to find some of my people but was soon seen by five horsemen who shouted:

"Boy, come over here, or the devil take you! We will shoot you so that you belch smoke!"

I remained standing still and stiff with my mouth open as I did not know what the horsemen wanted, and I looked at them as a cat at a new stable-door. As they were unable to cross to me because a swamp lay between, this made them angry and one of them emptied his carabine at me. The sudden fire and unexpected bang, which the echo made even more terrifying, frightened me to such an extent that I at once fell down to the earth with all four limbs stretched out. I did not move a vein from fear and although the riders went their way, without doubt leaving me for dead, the whole day I did not find the courage to get up nor to look around.

Only when night fell again I rose and wandered a long time in the forest, until I saw a rotting tree, its phosphorescence shimmering in the distance, which terrified me anew. At once I turned back and walked along until again I saw another rotting tree, from which again I ran away. In this way I spent the night approaching and fleeing from one decaying tree to another.

At last sweet daylight came to my help urging the trees to cease plaguing me, but this was not much help, for my heart was full of fear and fright, my legs full of tiredness, my empty stomach full of hunger, my mouth full of thirst, my mind full of foolish imagination, and my eyes full of sleep. I still went on, but did not know where to; the farther I went, the deeper I came into the forest away from my people. An unintelligent animal in my stead would have better known what to do for its preservation. Yet I was clever enough, when again darkness fell, to crawl into a hollow tree, and thus to shelter myself for the night.

SIMPLICIUS MEETS THE HERMIT

SCARCELY HAD I SETTLED DOWN to sleep when I heard a voice:

“Oh, Great Love for us ungrateful men!
 Oh, my only Consolation: my Hope,
 My Treasure, oh my God!”

And more, which I could neither remember nor understand. These were words which in my straits could have consoled and gladdened a Christian’s heart. But, oh, simplicity and ignorance! To me they were alien sounds and an incomprehensible language from which I could grasp nothing but that which frightened me by its strangeness.

But hearing that the hunger and thirst of him who spoke thus should be stilled, my unbearable hunger and empty stomach urged me to invite myself as a guest. Therefore I took courage to leave my hollow tree and to approach the voice I had heard. I became aware of a tall man with grey-black hair hanging down raggedly on his shoulders. He had a wild beard almost shaped like a Swiss cheese. His face, though pale yellow and haggard, was yet refined and his long robe was stitched and patched out of more than a thousand pieces of cloth. Round his neck and his body he had wound a heavy iron chain like St Wilhelmus, and altogether appeared to my eyes so horrible and frightening that I started to tremble like a wet dog. My fear increased even more when he took a crucifix about six feet long and pressed it against his breast, and not knowing what to make of him I could only think that this old man must be the wolf of whom my dad had spoken.

In an agony of fear I reached for my bagpipe which I had saved as my only treasure from the horsemen. I blew, tuned up and made a terrific noise to drive this horrid wolf away. Such sudden and strange music in this wild place shocked the hermit at first, doubtless believing a devilish monster had come as had happened once to the great Antonius, to frighten and disturb his prayers. But as soon as he recovered, he mocked me as his tempter in

the hollow tree into which I had taken refuge again. Indeed he was so courageous that he advanced towards me to jeer the enemy of mankind:

“Oho,” he said, “you are the right fellow to disturb saintly men...”

More I could not understand as his approach caused in me such shuddering and horror that I lost my senses and swooned away. I do not remember how I came to myself again. I only know that I found myself outside the hollow tree and the old man was holding my head on his lap and had opened my jerkin. When I saw the hermit so close to me I started such a gruesome crying in fear that he might tear the heart out of my body. But he said:

“My son, be quiet! I will not harm you. Be calm.”

But the more he tried to console me and caress me, the more I cried.

“Oh, you will devour me! You are the wolf and you will eat me up!”

“Oh, no, my son,” he said. “Be calm. I won’t eat you.”

This struggle I continued for a long while until at last I was persuaded to follow him into his hut. Here Poverty was housekeeper, Hunger was cook and Scarcity was kitchen maid. My belly was refreshed with some vegetables and a drink of water, and my mind which was completely confused was consoled through the old man’s friendliness. Thereafter I easily followed the temptations of sweet sleep and paid my tribute to nature. The hermit understood my need and left me alone in his hut as there was room for one only. About midnight I woke up again and heard him singing this song, which I later learnt myself:

Come, nightingale, console the night!
 Allow your voice’s smooth delight
 To fill the air with ringing;
 Come, magnify your Maker’s name
 And put all sleeping birds to shame
 That will not join your singing:
 Pour from your throat
 Your crystal call: you can for all
 The earth recite
 God’s praises in the heavenly height.

Although the light has died away
 And now we must in darkness stay,
 Yet we in jubilation
 Sing of God’s goodness and His power
 Because no night can hinder our

Unending acclamation.
 Pour from your throat
 Your crystal call: you can for all
 The earth recite
 God's praises in the heavenly height.

Echo, wild and wandering noise,
 Seeks out the clamour of your joys,
 All descants far excelling:
 No lurking weariness can be
 Our master while his melody
 All slumber is dispelling.
 Pour from your throat
 Your crystal call: you can for all
 The earth recite
 God's praises in the heavenly height.

The stars which ornament the sky
 Reveal themselves to glorify
 And honour God's creation.
 The owl as well, who cannot sing,
 Is hooting that she too may bring
 To God her adoration.
 Pour from your throat
 Your crystal call: you can for all
 The earth recite
 God's praises in the heavenly height.

Come, songbird closest to my heart,
 We will not play the sluggards' part
 And waste the night with slumbers:
 But rather till the blushing day
 Has made these gloomy forests gay
 Praise God in tuneful numbers.
 Pour from your throat
 Your crystal call: you can for all
 The earth recite
 God's praises in the heavenly height.

During this song I really believed that nightingale and owl and echo had joined in, and if I had known the melody I would have rushed out of the hut to get my bagpipe, so enchanted was I with the harmony of the song. But I fell asleep again and did not wake up until well into the day, when the hermit stood before me and said:

“Get up, my little one. I will give you food and then show you the path through the forest that you may reach your people and get to the next village before nightfall.”

I asked him:

“What do you mean by ‘people’ and ‘village’?”

“Have you never been in a village,” he said, “and do you not know what people or men are?”

“No,” I replied, “Nowhere have I been but here. But tell me, what are people, men and village?”

“God bless me,” answered the hermit, “are you a fool or sane?”

“No,” said I, “my mum’s and my dad’s boy am I, and not a fool or sane.”

The hermit was amazed and crossed himself, sighing deeply.

“Well, dear child, for God’s sake, I am obliged to enlighten you.”

And then our questions and answers went on as follows:

“What is your name?”

“I am called Boy.”

“I can well see that you are not a little girl. What did your father and mother call you?”

“I had no father nor mother.”

“Who then gave you your shirt?”

“Oh, my mum.”

“What did your mum call you?”

“She called me boy, even rascal, long-eared ass, clumsy dunce, gallows-bird.”

“Who was your mum’s husband?”

“Nobody.”

“With whom did your mum sleep at night?”

“With my dad.”

“What did your dad call you?”

“He, too, called me Boy.”

“But what was the name of your dad?”

“He’s called Dad.”

“What did your mum call him?”

“Dad, and even Master.”

“Did she never call him something else?”

“Oh yes, she did.”

“What, then?”

“Bully, rough bumpkin, old pig, and many more names when she was cross.”

“You are a poor, ignorant wretch, for you know neither your parents’ nor your own name.”

“Oho, but neither do you!”

“Do you know how to pray?”

“No, my dad told me only wolves prey.”

“That’s not what I mean, but whether you know the Lord’s prayer. ‘Our Father...’”

“Yes, I know it.”

“Then, repeat it.”

“Our dear Father, chart in Heaven, hollow they name, kingdom come, woe-be-gone on earth and Heaven, give us trespass as we give trespass, not in temptation but deliver us from kingdom, power and glory for ever and ever Ama.”

“Have you ever been to church?”

“Tell me, what is a church?”

“Oh, God bless me, don’t you know anything about our Lord?”

“Yes, I do. He hangs at our chamber door where my mum glued him when she brought him back from the church festival.”

“Oh, merciful God, now I see what a blessing and grace it is when you bestow your knowledge upon us. Oh, Lord, make me worthy to honour your holy name and to thank you for your grace which you have amply given to me. Hear, now. Simplicius – for I can’t call you by any other name – when you say the Lord’s prayer you must say it like this: ‘Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and...’”

“And cheese as well.”

“Dear child, be quiet and learn; that is more important to you than cheese. A lad such as you should not interrupt an old man in his speech, but be silent, listen and learn. If only I knew where your parents live I would like to take you back and teach them as well how to bring up their children.”

“I don’t know where to go. Our house is burnt down and my mum has run away, and my dad too; and our maid was ill in the stable.”

“Who has burnt down your house?”

“Oh, iron men came. They were sitting on things as big as oxen but without horns. They stabbed sheep, cows and pigs, and so I ran away, and then the house was burnt.”

“Where was your dad, then?”

“Oh, the iron men bound him up and our old goat licked his feet, and so my dad had to laugh and gave the iron men many silver coins, big ones and small ones, also pretty yellow ones and lovely glittering things, and a pretty string with white beads.”

“And when did that happen?”

“Oh, when I was shepherding the sheep. They even wanted to take my bagpipe.”

“When were you looking after the sheep?”

“Oh, didn’t you hear, when the iron men came, and then our Ann told me to run away, or the soldiers would take me with them; she meant the iron men, so I ran away, and came here.”

“And where do you want to go now?”

“I don’t know. I will stay with you.”

“To keep you here is neither good for you nor me; eat now and afterwards I will take you back to your people.”

“Oh, tell me, what do you mean by ‘people’?”

“People are men like you and I. Your dad, your mum, and your Ann are humans, and when there are many together we call them people. Now go and eat.”

This was our conversation during which the hermit looked at me often with the deepest of sighs, and I do not know whether it was because he pitied my very great simplicity and ignorance, or because of a reason about which I heard many years later.

I started to eat and stopped chattering, and when I had eaten enough the old man told me to go away. So I used the tenderest words which my peasant rudeness allowed to persuade him to keep me with him, and although he found it difficult he at last consented to let me stay, more perhaps to teach me the Christian religion than to make use of my help in his old age. His greatest worry was that my tender youth would not be able to endure for long the rigours of such a hard life.

My proving time lasted about three weeks. I behaved so well that the hermit developed a strange liking for me, not so much because of the work I did for him but because I was so eager to listen to his teachings and the smooth waxlike tablet of my heart was able to accept them. For these reasons he became more and more enthused to lead me to godliness.

He started his lessons with the fall of Lucifer. From there we came to Paradise from which we and our forbears were dispelled. We touched on the law of Moses, and he taught me with the help of God's ten commandments and their interpretation – of which he said they are the true guide to learn God's will – to distinguish virtue from vice and to do good and avoid evil. At last he came to the Gospels and he told me of Christ's birth, suffering, death and resurrection. Finally he concluded with the Last Judgment, and evoked heaven and earth before my eyes. All this he did without diffuseness, as in this way he believed I would better understand it. When he had finished with one subject, he started another, and was able to answer my questions so kindly that he could not have instructed me better. His life and his lessons were to me a continuous sermon which I absorbed through God's grace fruitfully, for my mind was not at all so stupid and wooden. So in three weeks' time I had not only grasped all that which a Christian should know but I developed such a love for his teachings, that I could scarcely sleep at night.

Since then I have thought very often of these events and have found that Aristotle in the third book of his writings, *De anima*, concluded rightly in comparing the human soul with an empty, unmarked tablet of wax. The reason why I comprehended everything that the pious hermit taught me so quickly was that he found the tablet of my soul completely empty and lacking impressed pictures on it which could prevent acceptance of his teaching. In spite of all that, my naive simplicity towards other people remained unchanged, and that is why the hermit – as he did not know my real name – continued to call me Simplicius. I learnt even to pray, and when he at last had given in to my persistent intention to stay with him, we built a hut similar to his own for me. It was of wood, twigs and earth, shaped almost like the tents of the musketeers in the field, or even more like the dug-outs which peasants make for their turnips, and so low that I could hardly sit in it. My bed was made of dry leaves and grass, and was just as long as the hut itself so that I do not know whether I should call such an abode or hole, a covered bed or a hut.

The first time I saw the hermit reading the Bible, I was unable to imagine with whom he could be having such a secret yet solemn conversation. I perceived very well the movement of his lips and even heard him murmur, but I saw and heard nobody who talked to him, although I did not know anything of reading and writing, I realized through his eyes that it had something to do with the book.

I watched the book carefully and when he had put it aside I took and opened it by chance at the first chapter of Job, and a beautifully illuminated woodcut appeared before my eyes. I asked the pictures odd questions, but as I got no answers, I became impatient and said, just when the hermit unnoticed stood behind me:

“You little bunglers, have you no tongues any more? Haven’t you just spoken to my father?” (That is what I called the hermit.) “I see well that you drive my poor dad’s sheep away, and burn his house – stop! I will quench this fire.”

With that I got up to fetch water as I thought it was needed.

“Where to, Smplicius?” asked the hermit behind my back.

“Oh, father,” I answered, “There are soldiers. They have sheep and want to drive them away. They have taken them from the poor man with whom you have spoken; his house is in full flame and will soon burn down if I don’t put it out.”

With these words I pointed with my finger at what I saw.

“Keep still,” said the hermit, “There is no danger here.”

I answered, according to my idea of politeness: “But are you blind? Stop them from driving the sheep away whilst I fetch water!”

“Oho,” said the hermit, “These pictures are not alive. They are only made to bring old stories before our eyes.”

I answered: “But you yourself have talked to them just now. Why should they not be alive?”

The hermit was forced to laugh, quite against his will and habit, and said: “Dear child, these pictures cannot talk. But what their meaning and character is I can see from these small black lines. This is called reading, and when I read you think I am talking with the pictures but that is not so.”

I replied: “If I am a human as you are I should be able to see from the black lines what you can see. How can I understand your words, dear father? Do explain it to me.”

Thereupon he said: “Well, my son, I will teach you so that you can talk to these pictures just as well as I can, and so that you will understand what they mean. However it will take time in which I must have patience and you perseverance.”

He then wrote me an alphabet on birch bark which was shaped like the printed letters and when I knew the letters I learnt to spell, and later to read, and at last to write even better than the hermit himself as I always copied the printed type.

I remained about two years in this forest until the hermit died, and after that perhaps still a little longer than half a year. Therefore I think it as well to describe to the curious reader what he might care to know of our work, doings and how we spent our life.

Our food consisted of all sorts of vegetables from our garden, carrots, cabbage, beans, peas. We did not refuse beech nuts, wild apples, pears and cherries, even acorns when we were hungry. The bread, or better cake, we baked in hot ashes from ground maize. In winter we caught birds with traps and nets; in spring and summer God presented us with young ones from the nests. Often we had nothing but snails and frogs. And we did not dislike fishing with nets and hook, for not far from our hut there flowed a stream rich in fish and crayfish. Once we caught a young wild pigling which we put into a sty and reared and fattened it with acorns and beech-nuts, which in the end we ate. My hermit knew that it could not be a sin if one enjoys what God has created for such purpose. We used very little salt, and no spice at all, to avoid arousing the lust for drinking as we had no cellar. Our supply of salt we obtained from a parson who lived about ten miles away from us and of whom I still have much to say.

As for utensils, we were sufficiently stocked. We had a shovel, a hoe, an axe, a chopper, and an iron pot for cooking, which however was not our property but was borrowed from the parson. Each of us had a much-used worn knife. These were our possessions – nothing else. We did not need bowls, plates, spoons, forks, cauldrons, frying pans, roasting spits, nor salt cellar nor other table and kitchen ware, for our pot served us as bowl, and our hands were our forks and spoons. If we wanted to drink we used a pipe at the well, or put our mouths into the water. We had no clothing, no wool, no silk, no cotton, nor linen, for bed, table and tapestries, but that which we carried on our bodies, and we thought we had enough when we were able to protect ourselves from rain and frost.

We kept no special rule or order in our household except on Sundays and Holy Days, when we started to depart about midnight in order to reach the parson's church early without being observed by anyone, for it was a little away from the village. There we climbed onto the broken organ from where we could see the altar and pulpit. When I saw the priest for the first time entering the pulpit I asked the hermit what he wanted to do in this big tub. After the service was over we went home in the same way unobserved as we arrived; with tired feet and body we reached our abode and with good teeth ate bad fare. The rest of the time the hermit spent in praying and instructing me in godly things.

On working days we did what was most urgent and that which time and circumstance made necessary. Sometimes we worked in the garden, another time we collected rich soil instead of dung from shady places and from hollow trees to improve our kitchen-garden. Sometimes we wove baskets or fish-traps, or prepared firewood, went fishing, or occupied ourselves with other tasks against idleness.

Under all these occupations the hermit never ceased to teach me faithfully in all good faculties. In the mean time, I learnt by this hard life to endure hunger, heat, cold and heavy labour – indeed, to overcome every hardship and, above all, to recognize God and serve him truthfully. This was the noblest task of all.

My loyal hermit wished me to know only as much as he believed a Christian should know to reach best his goal, to pray and work hard. So it happened that I became well acquainted with Christian knowledge, and could speak the German language most beautifully as if it were spoken by Orthographia herself, but nevertheless I remained a simpleton. So much so that when I eventually left the forest, I was such a miserable fool in the ways of the world that not even a dog would leave his place by the stove to answer my call.

I spent almost two years in this manner, and was scarcely accustomed to the strenuous life of a hermit when my best friend on earth took his hoe, gave me the shovel and led me, as it was his daily habit, to our garden, where we used to say our prayers.

“Now, Simplicius, dear child,” he said, “God be praised! The time has come that I must quit this world and leave you behind. As I can foresee vaguely that you will not stay in this wilderness for long, I want to strengthen you on the road of virtue and give you some advice which may guide your life to salvation, so that you may be blessed to stand with all the holy chosen ones in the presence of God.”

His words filled my eyes with tears. They appeared to me unbearable, and I said: “My most beloved father, will you leave me alone in this wild forest? Will you...”

I could not utter more as the passionate love for my faithful father overwhelmed my tortured heart so much that I fell as though dead at his feet. But he lifted me up again, consoled me and admonished me, almost questioning my error, whether I would like to oppose the will of the Almighty.

“Don’t you know,” he continued, “that neither Heaven nor Hell can do this? Not like this, my son. With what do you want to burden my poor body which is longing for peace? Do you want to urge me to remain longer

in this valley of lament? Oh no, my son, let me go, as God's explicit will calls me thither. With all joy I prepare myself to follow His godly command. Instead of uselessly crying, follow my last words which are: Know thyself. Even if you grow as old as Methuselah, keep this maxim in your heart. For most men are condemned because they do not know what they have been and what they could and should have become. Further: beware of bad company for its perniciousness is unspeakable."

He gave me an example, and said: "If you put a drop of Malvoisier in a vessel with vinegar, it will turn at once into vinegar. Dearest son, stand firm and don't be diverted from the praiseworthy work which you have begun, for he who perseveres will be blessed. But should you, in your human weakness, fall, do not cling spitefully to your sins but lift yourself up through penitence."

The pious man admonished me because of my youth with only these few words, for few words can be better kept in mind than a long sermon which may soon be forgotten. These three ideas: to know yourself, to avoid bad company, and to remain constant, the holy man found good and essential as he had proved them himself and had not failed in them. For after he had known himself, he fled not only bad company but even the whole world, and remained constant in that condition to his very end.

After speaking, he began to dig his own grave with a hoe and I helped as well as I could and, as he ordered me, without guessing what his intention was. And then he said to me:

"My dear, true and only son, for I have created no other being than you to the honour of our Lord, when my soul has gone to its appointed place, give my body your duty and last rites. Cover me with the earth which we have dug from this grave!"

Then he took me into his arms, pressed me and kissed me much harder to his breast than I believed it was possible for him.

"Dear child," he said, "I recommend you into God's protection, and I will die the happier in the hope that he will protect you."

I, however, could do nothing but lament and wail. I clung to his chain which he carried round his neck and hoped to keep him so that he should not escape me. But he said:

"My son, leave me, that I can see whether my grave is long enough."

Therewith he took his chain and his gown off, climbed down into the grave like somebody who wished to lie down and sleep, and said:

"Oh, great God, take again the soul which thou has given me. Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit..."

He closed his lips and eyes gently; but I stood there stiff like a stock-fish and did not know that his dear soul had already left his body, as I had seen him often in such ecstasies.

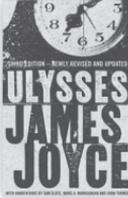
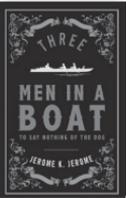
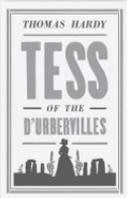
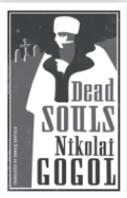
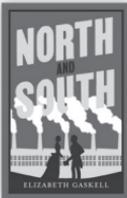
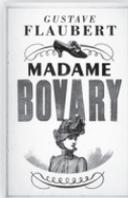
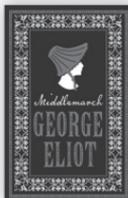
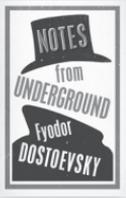
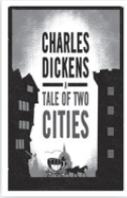
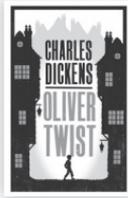
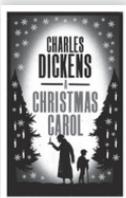
I remained, as it was my habit in such events, several hours beside the grave in prayer. When my most beloved hermit did not rise I went down to him in the grave and started to shake him, to kiss and caress him. But there was no more life. Grim unrelenting Death had robbed poor Simplicius of his gentle companion. I wept and showered the soulless body with my tears, and ran with miserable crying hither and thither. At last I began with more sighs than shovels to cover him with earth, and when I had almost covered his face, I went down again and uncovered it so that I could see and kiss it once again. This I went on doing the whole day until I was finished and the funeral ceremonies had come to an end – for neither hearse, coffin, pall, candles, sexton nor clergy were present to mourn the dead.

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