LITERATUR, DIE ANKOMMT

GOTTFRIED KELLER

Clothes Make the Man

Sample materials

Reading Edition

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READING SECTION 01

Arrival in Goldach

On a bleak November day, a poor little tailor was walking along the road to Goldach, a small, wealthy town only a few hours from Seldwyla. In his pocket he carried nothing but a thimble[1], which, having no coin of any kind, he kept turning between his fingers whenever the cold made him put his hands into his trouser pockets. His fingers positively ached from all that turning and rubbing, for the bankruptcy of a master tailor in Seldwyla had cost him both his wages and his work, and forced him to leave. His breakfast had consisted of a few snowflakes that had flown into his mouth, and he had still less idea where the smallest scrap of dinner might come from. Begging was terribly hard for him, indeed seemed quite impossible, because over his black Sunday suit, the only one he owned, he wore a wide, dark-grey circular cloak[2] lined with black velvet. It gave its wearer a noble, romantic appearance, especially as his long black hair and little moustache were carefully tended, and his features, though pale, were regular.

Such an appearance had become a necessity to him, without his having any wicked or deceitful intention; he was perfectly content if people would only leave him alone to do his work quietly. Yet he would sooner have starved than parted with his cloak or his Polish fur cap, which he also knew how to wear with considerable dignity.

For this reason he could work only in larger towns, where such things attracted less attention; when he travelled without savings, he fell into the greatest distress. Whenever he approached a house, people looked at him in surprise and curiosity, expecting almost anything except a request for charity. Since he was no fluent speaker either, the words died in his mouth. Thus he was a martyr[3] to his cloak, suffering hunger as black as its velvet lining.

As he struggled miserably and weakly up a hill, he came upon a new and comfortable travelling carriage. A gentleman’s coachman had collected it in Basel and was taking it to his master,

1 Thimble: a small metal cap worn on a finger to protect it from the needle when sewing.
2 Circular cloak: a wide, sleeveless cloak cut in an approximately circular shape.
3 Martyr: originally someone who suffers or dies for a belief; here, someone who accepts suffering for something.

a foreign count living somewhere in eastern Switzerland in an old castle he had rented or bought. The carriage had all manner of fittings for carrying luggage and therefore looked heavily laden, although every compartment was empty. Because of the steep road, the coachman was walking beside the horses. On reaching the top and climbing back to his seat, he asked the tailor whether he would like to ride in the empty carriage. It was just beginning to rain, and he had seen at a glance how wearily and wretchedly the pedestrian was making his way through the world.

The tailor accepted gratefully and modestly. The carriage rolled swiftly away with him, and in less than an hour swept magnificently and thunderously through the gateway of Goldach. Outside the first inn, called The Scales, the grand vehicle stopped abruptly, and the porter immediately tugged so fiercely at the bell that its wire almost snapped. Down rushed the landlord and his servants, flinging open the carriage door. Children and neighbours had already gathered round the splendid vehicle, curious to see what kernel would emerge from so extraordinary a shell. When the bewildered tailor at last sprang out in his cloak, pale and handsome, his melancholy eyes lowered, he seemed to them at the very least a mysterious prince or a count’s son. The space between the carriage and the inn door was narrow, and the spectators blocked most of the remaining way. Whether he lacked the presence of mind or the courage to push through the crowd and simply continue on his journey, he made no such move, but allowed himself to be led, unresisting, into the house and up the stairs. He fully realised his strange new position only when he found himself in a comfortable dining room and his venerable cloak was obligingly removed.

‘Would the gentleman care to dine?’ he was asked. ‘You shall be served at once; dinner is just ready!’

Without waiting for a reply, the landlord of The Scales ran into the kitchen, crying, ‘In the name of three devils! Now we have nothing but beef and the leg of mutton! I cannot cut into the partridge pie[4]; it is promised to the evening guests. That is always the way! On the one day when we expect nobody and have nothing ready, a gentleman like this must arrive! The coachman has a coat of arms on his buttons, and the carriage is fit for a duke! As for the young man, he can scarcely bring himself to open his mouth, he is so grand!’

But the cook replied calmly, ‘Well, what is there to complain about, sir? Just take up the pie boldly; he will hardly eat the whole thing! The evening guests can have it in portions. We shall manage six portions yet!’

‘Six portions? You seem to forget that those gentlemen are accustomed to eating their fill!’ said the landlord. But the cook continued, unshaken, ‘And so they shall! Send someone quickly for half a dozen cutlets; we need them for the stranger anyway, and whatever he

4 Partridge pie: a pie containing meat from partridges, small game birds.

leaves I shall cut into small pieces and mix into the pie. Just leave it to me!’

But the worthy landlord said gravely, ‘Cook, I have told you before that such things will not do in this town or in this house! We live decently and honourably here, and we can afford to!’

‘Well, goodness me, yes, yes!’ cried the cook, finally growing a little excited. ‘If we cannot find a way round it, we must make a sacrifice! Here are two woodcocks I have just bought from the hunter; they can go into the pie in the end. Those fine palates will not object to a partridge pie adulterated with woodcock! Besides, we have the trout. I threw the biggest into boiling water when that remarkable carriage arrived, and its sauce is already bubbling in the little pan. So we have a fish, the beef, vegetables with cutlets, the roast mutton and the pie. Only give me the key so that we can fetch the preserves and dessert! Indeed, sir, you could hand that key over to me with a clear conscience and some trust, instead of making us chase you everywhere and often putting us in the greatest difficulty!’

‘My dear cook! You must not take offence. On my late wife’s deathbed I had to promise always to keep the keys myself. It is a matter of principle, not mistrust. Here are the cucumbers, here the cherries, here the pears and here the apricots. But the old confectionery will not do. Lise must run quickly to the confectioner for fresh pastries, three platefuls, and if he has a good cake, let him send that too!’

‘But sir! You cannot charge a single guest for all that. You will never recover the cost, however willing you are!’

‘Never mind; our honour is at stake! It will not ruin me. A great gentleman travelling through our town must be able to say that he found a decent dinner, even though he came quite unexpectedly, and in winter! Nobody shall say of us what they say of the Seldwyla landlords, who gobble up everything good themselves and set the bones before strangers! Now then, briskly, cheerfully, hurry, all of you!’

Throughout these elaborate preparations, the tailor was in an agony of fear as glittering dishes were laid upon the table. However eagerly the starving man had longed for food a little earlier, he now longed just as anxiously to escape the threatening meal. At last he summoned his courage, put on his cloak and cap, and went out to look for the exit.

In his confusion, however, he could not immediately find the stairs in the rambling house. The waiter, whom the devil kept driving ceaselessly about, assumed that he was looking for the privy. ‘Allow me, sir; I shall show you the way!’ he cried, leading him down a long passage that ended nowhere but at a beautifully varnished door bearing an elegant inscription.

So the man in the cloak went in without protest, meek as a lamb, and duly locked the door behind him. There he leaned against the wall with a bitter sigh, wishing himself back in the golden freedom of the open road, which now, however foul the weather, seemed to him the highest happiness.

Yet here he became entangled in his first lie of his own making, by remaining a little while in the locked room; and thus he set foot on the downward path of evil.

Meanwhile the landlord, who had seen him go past in his cloak, shouted, ‘The gentleman is cold! More heat in the dining room! Where is Lise? Where is Anne? Quick, a basket of wood in the stove, and a few handfuls of shavings to make it blaze! Devil take it, are people to sit down to dinner in their cloaks at The Scales?’

And when the tailor emerged again from the long passage, melancholy as the ancestral ghost of an old castle, the landlord, with a hundred compliments and much rubbing of hands, escorted him back into the accursed room. Without further delay he was invited to the table, his chair was drawn up, and the smell of the nourishing soup, such as he had not smelt for a long time, robbed him of the last of his will. He sat down in God’s name and at once dipped the heavy spoon into the golden-brown broth. In deep silence he revived his faint spirits, while he was served with respectful quiet and composure.

When he had emptied his plate and the landlord saw how well he liked it, he politely encouraged him to take another spoonful: it was good for one in such rough weather. Now the trout arrived, wreathed in greenery, and the landlord served him a fine piece. But the tailor, tormented by worry, did not dare use the gleaming knife in his embarrassment, and instead fussed timidly and delicately at the fish with his silver fork. The cook noticed this as she peered through the door to see the great gentleman, and said to the people beside her, ‘Praise be to Jesus Christ! There is someone who still knows how to eat a fine fish properly, instead of sawing at the tender creature as though slaughtering a calf. That is a gentleman of a great house. I would swear to it, if swearing were not

forbidden! And how handsome and sad he is! He must be in love with some poor young lady whom they will not let him marry. Yes, yes, fine people have their troubles too!’

Meanwhile the landlord noticed that the guest was not drinking, and said respectfully, ‘The gentleman does not care for the table wine? Would you perhaps prefer a glass of good Bordeaux, which I can warmly recommend?’

Here the tailor made his second mistake of his own accord, saying yes out of obedience instead of no. At once the landlord went down to the cellar himself to fetch a choice bottle; for it mattered enormously to him that people should say there was something worthwhile to be had in the town. When the guest, again troubled by his conscience, took the tiniest sips of the wine, the landlord ran joyfully into the kitchen, smacked his tongue, and cried, ‘Devil take me, he knows what he is about! He lets my good wine fall upon his tongue as carefully as one lays a gold coin on a goldsmith’s scales!’

‘Praise be to Jesus Christ!’ said the cook. ‘I said he knew!’

Thus the meal continued, very slowly, because the poor tailor ate and drank with such delicate hesitation, and the landlord left each dish before him for a good while to give him time. Yet what the guest had eaten so far hardly amounted to anything. Instead, his hunger, continually and dangerously teased, now began to overcome his terror. When the partridge pie appeared, his mood changed and a firm thought began to take shape. Things are as they are, he told himself, warmed and emboldened by another little drop of wine; I should be a fool to face the coming disgrace and persecution without at least having eaten my fill! Better provide for myself while there is time! That little tower they have put there may easily be the last dish. I shall stick to it, come what may! Once something is inside me, no king can take it away again!

No sooner thought than done. With the courage of despair he attacked the delicious pie without any thought of stopping. In less than five minutes half of it had vanished, and matters began to look very serious for the evening guests. Meat, truffles, dumplings, base, lid: down went everything without respect of persons, his only concern being to pack his little belly before disaster struck. He drank deep draughts of wine and thrust great pieces of bread into his mouth. In short, supplies were being rushed in as busily as hay is hurried straight from the nearby meadow into the barn on pitchforks when a thunderstorm is rising.

Once more the landlord ran into the kitchen and cried, ‘Cook! He is eating up the pie, although he scarcely touched the roast! And he drinks the Bordeaux half a glass at a time!’

‘Much good may it do him,’ said the cook. ‘Let him be. He knows what partridges are! If he were an ordinary fellow, he would have stuck to the roast!’

‘So I say,’ replied the landlord. ‘It does not look altogether elegant, admittedly; but when I travelled to learn my trade, I saw only generals and high-ranking clergymen eat like that!’

Meanwhile the coachman had had the horses fed and eaten a substantial meal himself in the room for ordinary people. Being in a hurry, he soon ordered the horses harnessed again. The people of The Scales could restrain themselves no longer. Before it was too late, they asked the gentleman’s coachman outright who his master upstairs was and what he was called. The coachman, a mischievous and cunning fellow, replied, ‘Has he not told you himself?’

‘No,’ they said. ‘I can well believe that,’ he answered. ‘He does not say much in a day. Well, he is Count Strapinski! But he will stay here today, and perhaps for several days, since he has ordered me to drive on ahead.’

He played this nasty joke to take revenge on the little tailor, who, he imagined, had gone straight into the house to play the grand gentleman instead of offering him a word of thanks and farewell for his kindness. He carried his Eulenspiegel trick[5] to its utmost extent: he climbed into the carriage without asking for the bill for himself and the horses, cracked his whip, and drove out of town. All this was accepted as perfectly proper and charged to the good tailor’s account.

Now it so happened that the tailor, a native of Silesia[6], really was called Strapinski: Wenzel Strapinski. Whether this was a coincidence, or whether the tailor had taken out his journeyman’s travel book[7] in the carriage, left it there, and the coachman had pocketed it, is another matter. Be that as it may, when the landlord, beaming with pleasure and rubbing his hands, stepped up to ask whether Count Strapinski would take a glass of old Tokay[8] or a glass of champagne with dessert, and informed him that his rooms were being prepared, poor Strapinski turned pale, became confused afresh, and made no reply at all.

5 Eulenspiegel trick: a prank like those played by Till Eulenspiegel, who makes fools of others in old stories.
6 Silesia: a historical region now lying mainly in Poland.
7 Journeyman’s travel book: an official document recording a travelling craftsman’s stays and employment.
8 Tokay: wine from the region of Tokaj in Hungary.