



“THE TALE OF FOOLISH GENEROSITY”

THIS IS A BIT OF ADVICE to everyone inclined to thoughtless generosity: no one can keep it up and do well in the end.¹ I don't condemn making gifts, or rewarding good deeds; but it takes moderation and judgment to earn good people's respect without losing everything you own. Squanderers care about nothing, whatever may happen to their possessions. Those who set the same value on everybody witlessly throw away what they have. Many well-off people commit this mistake, and in a short while they are much abused; for those who got something out of them, far from showing gratitude, desert them. This is summed up in the saying “So much you have, so much you're worth, so much I love you.”² The prudent person is not like that, but reflects on how much God has lent him of His possessions. Then, having considered wisely, he makes more of the poor man than of the rich. For I think anyone a fool if, having the means, he does not generously share with the needy. To the thoughtlessly openhanded person, though, it makes no difference if he gives to the poor or to the rich.

And there are people who often lose what they have because they scarcely have a notion of the pain and exertion that a workingman must experience before he can acquire something worth having. No one can know the value of possessions, without grasping the efforts of the person who acquires them.³ By way of example I shall tell a story from which you who wish to comprehend it may learn this: the one who suffers hardship, afterward knows better how to enjoy comfort. Now listen—but let no one heckle!⁴ Philippe begins his tale.

At four leagues⁵ from the sea there lived a goodman⁶ and his wife. This man made his living by going to the shore to fetch salt. He had put in a long day's traveling when he would return with his load.⁷ Before marrying he got along nicely, for he would sell his salt so well that he never lost anything by it and was well fleshed, well fed, well shod and clothed—to the point where he did not know how well off he was. He wanted a wife, and went about the matter until he had one. Once the wedding was over he resumed his trips; he went to the sea, brought back salt, and exhorted his wife to sell it and take the money. She told him not to undervalue her good sense, but go again for salt; for if she could, she would sell it so cleverly that he would gain a third thereby.

The goodman was very glad to hear this. Cheerfully he went off again for salt that day, and the next, and every day, taking no rest. By day he traveled for his trade; but at night he had still more exertions to make. For his wife, who remained comfortably indoors and felt little of his weariness, would draw close to him and awaken and caress him, and so stir him and fire him up, however little he might feel like it, that he would stay awake until midnight to do what pleased her. And toward daybreak, when he wanted to sleep, she would say: "Up, my dear! I often see you sleep too long. By the faith I owe the Heavenly King, you ought to be two leagues away by now. You won't be back today by nightfall if you don't go faster than at a walk."

So he would have to rise early and go off for the salt, in spite of his fatigue. And his wife had a pleasant time at home, never leaving off singing. She did nothing but spend money and sing, and paid little attention to selling her salt. Her neighbors and women friends, who soon saw from her behavior how imprudent she was, went to her one after the other, beginning with the old woman who was best acquainted with dishonesty. This one went at her errand in a roundabout fashion, saying: "God keep you, my neighbor! Where's the man of the house?" "He's on his way toward the sea," answered his wife. "Surely, we can't help being very fond of him," said the flatterer. "I've never found him standoffish. Many a time, when he returned, he would willingly give me some salt. And you who are good and beautiful, see my little basket here; it would not hold a halfpenny's worth if it were filled to the brim. And so I beg you to give me some. You'll be rewarded for it." She answered: "Very gladly, as much as you need. Tell my neighbors, both men and women, and the widows and the young girls too, tell them to come and get it. I'll never be so short of supplies that I won't happily give them some. I don't want them to be in need of it. Come back when this runs out." "Mistress, farewell! This saying will do you good."

Then the old woman departed and went around telling all her neighbors in turn of the amiability that the salter's wife had showed to her. The women who needed salt were pleased to hear that the young woman was so obliging. "...,"⁸ said Mehaut, Richaut, and Hersent. "But we must go about it cleverly. It would not be a good idea, it seems to me, if we all went together. Let one of us go tomorrow, and another the next, until the third day." They did as they had said; they worked at diminishing the salt supply. They spoke to the salter's wife such plentiful words, few wise ones, many foolish, that her stores ran down.

By and by the goodman, the one who did the fetching and carrying, noticed that his supply gave out more often than before and that he had less

money than he was used to having. He was much troubled by not being able to account for the loss, until one day he saw Bertha coming out of his house. The goodman addressed her and asked what she had gone there for. "Good friend, I didn't go there for anything except to see Hermesent, your wife, whom I like very much, and she gave me some of her leavening," said she who well knew how to lie, "because I have to knead dough." Hearing this, the goodman thought that she was lying in her own defense, and so he opened the fold of her skirt and saw, quite plainly, a plateful of his salt.⁹ Now concealment was useless; he well knew how his salt disappeared. He left Bertha, who went off much disconcerted.

The salter, while regretting his loss, did not lose his head but considered how he might give his wife a sense of responsibility so that she would not be so openhanded. He turned the matter over in his mind until he came to a decision: he would not tell his wife what he had in view, but would make her go to the sea with him. He would in short order have her fetch salt, a whole load of it, so as to teach her a lesson. "She'll learn, tomorrow, whether I fly when I have my load on my head!" Thereupon he left off his thinking and went into his house. His wife spoke up: "Husband,"¹⁰ she said, "we are out of salt. You didn't load on much, so God save me! when you came away, the day before yesterday. But you'll be forgiven, provided that you bring more when you come back from there tomorrow." "Wife," said he, "gladly. But you would need to come with me and bring back a measure of it. There's nothing to it but enjoyment; you'll see the fields turning green and hear the lark sing, and it will cheer you up." "Husband," she said, "I agree. It will make things easier for you, I think, and I'm bored with staying in. I'll start tomorrow when it's daylight." They left it at that and went to bed shortly after supper.

As soon as day broke each of them got up promptly. They dressed and went toward the sea, carrying two old baskets. The wife found the outward trip very pleasurable; the cliff rang with her singing. The goodman showed no sign of his plan, but thought that when she came back he would be well avenged on her. They both kept on going until they came to the sea. There they took up and loaded so much salt that their baskets were filled to the brim; then they turned back. Today you will hear how Mistress Hermesent behaved.

When her burden became heavy, she had second thoughts about having come along. She began to be short of breath and to lag behind. Her husband was going on ahead, taking note of what was happening. He urged her to go at a good pace. She quickly responded, "Husband, I tell you for sure, it's not yet

midday. Let's rest a little!" The goodman said, "Come, come! You're too quick to rest; I don't believe we've gone a quarter of our way." Hearing this, the wife did not rejoice much. She took small pleasure in that burden she was carrying. If her husband had not been with her she would very soon have got rid of it; but she did not dare, on account of him. Instead, she hid her distress because she used to blame him when he would say that he was aching all over; and so she put up with it as best she could. There is much truth in "needs must."¹¹ She underwent this penance until she began to give out. She leaned against the side of a ditch and then set down what she was carrying. Seeing this, her husband stopped and took his own burden from his head. "Wife," he said, "how goes it? Many a time, it seems to me, you've blamed me for bringing back a small quantity. Shall I have your leave henceforth to load on as little as I like, on condition that I take with my own salt a little of yours?" "Husband," said she, "I take a vow: I'll never blame you for that again, for such burdens are much too heavy." Thereupon the goodman relieved her of a full third or more of her load and added it to his own. And nevertheless he made a great point of their soon going on, for he wanted her to get little rest.

They both loaded up once more and went on. They had not gone a league when she began to tire again. "Now I must swallow the pride I used to have," she thought. "Surely I was out of my senses when I trusted my neighbors. Please God that their spines might pain them as much as mine will hurt today, for the load I must bear! They'd better not come back urging me to give them salt for nothing! By the faith I owe to God Who does not lie, they'd be wasting their time. Ah, how weak I feel! When my husband would complain, my heart, which was so proud, would care little about his heavy labor. So help me God! He's avenged himself on me better than if he had beaten me."¹² I'll not be taken in any more. Let no one come again to the house to get a half pound of salt without bringing me the money for it! There are many wretched people who foolishly throw away what they ought to keep for their own use."

At that she stopped, unable to go on. She simply had to rest. Why should I go stretching out my tale or narrating her rest stops? If someone recounted them all, it would make for tedious listening. They halted so many times that when they entered their house it was nearly midnight. Don't think that Hermesent was sorry when she got there. She fell naked into bed, unable to hold herself up. The goodman was filled with rejoicing and nothing else. He had supper, and then retired. The next morning, when he saw it getting light, he said to his wife: "Get up! It's been day for a good while. Let's go for salt!" "Not this week!" "My dear, people must experience discomfort in

order to have something, in this world. For having possessions often brings wealth, joy, and power, which poverty wouldn't do. Poverty makes shame for many a soul."¹³ Such a tale did not much please his wife; she answered: "Husband, by my faith, I cannot go. I'm sorry. But, for God's sake, leave me at home, and I'll sell your salt better, believe me, than I ever did before. I hadn't realized the hard work of fetching it. If you will excuse me from going to the sea again, I'll always be nice to you from now on. I ache so much from going there that I understand your effort and your hard work better than I used to. But, if it pleases God, I'll sell so much this summer, up and down, that we'll buy a horse that will carry your burden." "Wife," he said, "I'll say no more. Since you have made an agreement with me, I shall watch how you get on."

At that he left; she remained. She was in bed until late morning. Then when she had rested enough she arose, toward midday. In her house there were already some four people awaiting her, wanting salt. She said to them: "Do you want salt?" The women said: "We don't want anything else. We know very well that you went there yesterday; now we'll have some, without stinting."¹⁴ And the salter's wife answered them: "By the faith I owe to the King of the world, never by your false words will you serve me such sauces as you've done for a long time. Not a penny's or a halfpenny's worth will you have if I don't get the money. There's something strange about you people: you think we get it for nothing when we go to the sea to fetch it. We don't! This became very clear to me yesterday. Many times I had to stop for rest. People don't have things just as they want. My whole body still aches. For anyone who has a coin, a coin's worth will be measured out straightaway. If someone doesn't have a coin, let that person leave a pledge. By God Who made me in His own image, in no other way will you carry away any salt. You won't make a fool of me anymore!"

When the neighbor women heard this, there were some who took some salt; and the one without money or pledge carried away none. Thereupon they left the place. Before two days had passed the salter's wife had got over her unwise openhandedness and had taken to good trading. Whatever her husband would bring back she would sell, so well and so dearly that before two summers had passed they had bought two horses, and the goodman set up a cart. From then on he could engage in taking salt around the region. Far from being disconcerted by this, he did so much that he prospered greatly. Thus he corrected his wife and cured her of foolish generosity. Afterward they did so much, and were so enterprising, that they were rich and at ease, and respected by their neighbors.

By this tale you may know that a foolishly generous person loses what he has; and such generosity often dwells in an idle heart, full of laziness. For a lazy person does not want to acquire anything, and imprudent people throw away what they have. Scripture says,¹⁵ it seems to me, that if anyone has to do with sloth, there is a real danger of going astray and being brought to misery. It also says that we are to acquire freely, as if to live, and to live as if soon to die; for we do not know when the hour of death is to come for each of us. Therefore I urge everyone to live wisely and to give fittingly. Now let us pray that God grant us to have such good dealings with all people that after our death, by His grace, we may look Him in the face. Amen! May God give us Paradise! With this my whole tale is told.