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The Chess Player

Ger Koopman

IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE. The whole day a cold wind had been blowing and now it had started to snow. Thousands—millions—of snowflakes came out of the sky and slowly covered the little village where Farmer Dyhema lived. They covered his fields, already plowed up for the next sowing; they covered his huge barns, full of hay or corn; they covered the yard, the big stable, and the house.

Old Farmer Dyhema had seen the snow coming down. He was sitting near the open fire in his easy chair. He liked the snow on his fields. It will make a better harvest next year, he thought. It was nice and warm in his room. On the table stood a chessboard. All the chessmen stood in their right places, four rows on the white and black squares of the board. Dyhema liked playing chess. He was waiting for the minister. Every Sunday evening the minister came to play chess with the old farmer, and also at Christmas time. He would come tonight. Oh, yes, Dyhema liked the game. He always won. There was nobody in the village who could play as well as he could. There was nobody in the village who was as rich as he was. He was the best farmer, the richest farmer, the best chess player; and he was honest and righteous, too. He lived alone with his servants. His wife had died years ago. But this Christmas he was not thinking of his wife. He was always alone, thinking about himself. How good the harvest had been this year! What an important man he was in the village! When he walked through the streets they took their hats off as he passed. When somebody needed help—he gave it. When somebody needed

home for christmas

work—he gave it. If anybody needed money—he lent it.

Suddenly the door opened. A servant came in. “It is rather late, Dyhema. Shall I keep the Christmas tart hot in the oven?”

Dyhema looked at the clock. “The minister is late,” he said. “Yes, keep the tart hot.”

The servant, moving toward the doorway, said, “I am afraid the minister will not come. The snow is very deep.”

Dyhema looked cross, but he only said, “I can wait.”

When the servant had gone, Dyhema stood up and looked out of the window. “Dear me, what a lot of snow,” he said. “I am sure the minister will not come. The snow is very deep.” Dyhema looked at the chessboard with longing eyes.

BUT SOMEBODY was coming! The Christ Child!

The whole day the Christ Child had been very busy. Christmas is his time, for then the hearts of people open; and that is what the Christ Child needs: open hearts. People think of their youth, how nice Christmas was at home. They think about their lives, and how things have turned out wrong. They long to change, to start anew. Then the Christ Child comes.

The whole day the Christ Child had been very busy. One thing had still to be done: to go to the old farmer, Dyhema. When God had told him that, he had said, “But his heart is not at all open.” But God had only said, “Go. It has been closed and hard for too long. It is time now.”

As the Christ Child was walking through the snow, he thought this over. What could he do? But when God says, “It is time,” then it is time. And so at once the Christ Child was in the room of the old farmer. Nobody had heard him coming; nobody had seen him, but suddenly he was there. “Good evening, Dyhema,” he said, in his beautiful voice.

The Chess Player

Dyhema looked, and looked again. "Who are you, little boy, and how did you come in?"

The Christ Child sat down on a chair, opposite Dyhema, near the fire.

"I am the Christ Child."

"The Christ Child? So. What do you need?"

"I only want to talk to you."

"There is nothing to talk about. I did everything a man can do. I gave five hundred guilders for the Christmas celebration in the church."

"I know," said the Christ Child, "and two hundred and fifty guilders for the Sunday School celebration."

"Yes," said the farmer again, "and five hundred guilders for the poor people in the village; and wherever there are sick people, I send my servants to bring them a parcel."

"I know it all," said the Christ Child, and he sighed. "You are like a king on a throne who gives little presents to all his people. Yet how small these gifts are if you think of the thousands of guilders which you earned this year. And all these gifts were given, not out of love for others, but only out of love to yourself, so that you can sit here, content and satisfied with yourself. Oh, if you only knew the Christmas story!"

"I know it. By heart. 'In the days of the Emperor Augustus...'"

"See, you are quite wrong!"

"Wrong?" Farmer Dyhema took the Bible which was lying near him. "See, here it is. 'In the days of the Emperor Augustus...'"

"Wrong! I know the story. I am the Christ Child! It was not long, long ago, in the days of Augustus. It happens every year anew. Somewhere every year a child is born, poor and without clothes, waiting to be helped, by you. Sometimes it is a sick

child, or a poor man, or a poor woman, waiting to be helped, by you. That is the Christmas story.”

“I know that I am a sinner before God,” said Dyhema. “Every one is a sinner before God. But as far as I was able I did what I could. I cannot give all my money away, or anything like that. That is just nonsense.”

“I do not ask only for money. I ask for much more than money. I ask for love! You said that you did everything you could? What about your daughter?”

The old farmer stood up angrily. “My daughter is dead. She is dead for me! If you were really the Christ Child you would know that ten years ago she married against my will. She married an artist, a musician, against my will. Children should obey their parents. No, do not speak about her.”

“She is poor. She has a son.”

“I know. It is her own fault. Not mine!”

The Christ Child looked at the clock. Half past seven. And at eight o’clock—at eight o’clock Dyhema’s daughter was to come here with her son. He had been to the place where she lived, and he had told her to go back to her father. He had said that everything would be all right when she came. And now there was only half an hour left, and the heart of the old farmer was harder than ever before. But he was not dismayed. God had sent him. He even smiled and said, “Let us play chess!”

“Can you play?”

“A little bit.”

“Come on. That is better than all this talking.”

They started. It seemed that the Christ Child was not a very good player. After ten minutes he had already lost two castles and a knight. Dyhema rubbed his hands. He would win the game. That was certain. When the Christ Child had lost nearly half his pieces, he suddenly spoke. “Imagine for

The Chess Player

a minute that your daughter came to you this Christmas Eve with your grandson. Would you receive them?"

"Stop that nonsense. Look at your game. You have nearly lost. And why should they come?"

"I have almost lost. Well, perhaps. But suppose I should win the game before eight o'clock, would you receive them?"

The old farmer laughed. "I would, because it is impossible."

The Christ Child smiled, too. It was one minute to eight. The Christ Child had only his king, queen and one bishop. Dyhema had almost all his men. Dyhema looked at the clock. "Eight o'clock," he said.

"Eight o'clock. And I think it's checkmate," said the Christ Child.

"Checkmate?" Dyhema looked at the board. His eyes widened. "Oh? Wait a minute. You have changed the positions of all my men. No, no! But what has happened?"

The Christ Child smiled again. "That is what happens in life," he said. Then he looked very earnest. "Often people think they are lost. They think that nothing in the world can help them. And then God looks and says, 'It is time.' And all at once everything looks different. Everything comes into a different light, and all at once you see that all is not lost, but won. Remember this, Dyhema! All is not lost in His eyes. The lowly shall be lifted up—the first shall be last." And then he was gone.

Dyhema stood up. He sat down in his chair near the fire. He closed his eyes. He would think this over.

SUDDENLY HE AWOKE. Somebody had knocked at the door. He rubbed his eyes. I have been sleeping, he thought. I had a wonderful dream about the Christ Child. He looked at

the table. There was the chessboard. The two rows of white men and the two rows of black men stood neatly on opposite sides of the board. Yes, it had been a dream. "Come in," he said. A servant came in.

"Dyhema, here is a little boy. He says..."

Dyhema stood up in astonishment. "A little boy with his mother?"

"No, he is alone. But he says his mother had an accident. She has sprained her ankle. She is waiting in the snow about half a mile away. She sent the boy for help."

Dyhema laughed. He thought, of course it is not my daughter. And then he said, "Send the servants out with the horse and cart. Make a room ready and bring her here. Send for the doctor. Bring the boy here."

The servant went out. A moment later a boy of about nine came in. Dyhema stood up. He was strangely moved. The boy looked—yes, he looked just as he himself must have looked long, long ago. "What is your name?"

"Sigurd," said the boy.

Dyhema sank back into his chair. He closed his eyes. Sigurd, that was his name. His daughter had called her son after him. But what about the Christ Child? It was a dream, of course. But dreams are lies, nonsense. But still there was the boy. His grandson. No. He would not receive his daughter. He stood up and went to the kitchen. Only one old servant was there. "Where are the others?" he asked.

"They are all with their families, of course, and two have gone out to fetch the poor woman," she said.

"I do not want her here! They must take her somewhere else!"

"Dyhema! On Christmas Eve you are going to refuse a poor woman your house! Very well. You are responsible. But I can-

The Chess Player

not go out and through the snow. Who will tell them?"

"As soon as they are here, call me. But don't let the woman come into the house."

Dyhema went back to the living room. The boy sat near the fireplace. When Dyhema came in he stood up and, going to him, the boy said, "Are you my grandfather?"

"Of course not," Dyhema said angrily.

The boy looked sad. "Then I have come to the wrong farm. You know, Mummy said, when she fell down, 'That light over there is the farm. Run over there and ask for help.' But it does not matter. When Mummy comes here she can tell you where she wanted to go. She was born in this village, you know. My granddad is the richest farmer in the village. My mummy said, 'He is like a little king. Everyone asks for his advice. He is very clever, you know.'"

Dyhema suddenly said, "Why are you going to your grandfather?"

"Mummy said that the Christ Child had told her to go. We have never been there. We are very poor, you know. My daddy is dead. We had no money, but mummy always said, 'I will not take the first step.' And then all at once she told me that the Christ Child had told her to go."

"Did she see the Christ Child?"

"I don't know. Afterwards she said it was a dream. And on the journey she was very uncertain. She said to me, once, 'Do not be surprised if we only stay for a short time.'"

Dyhema said nothing. He looked into the fire. Suddenly the boy saw the chessboard. He went to the table. "My granddad can play chess! He always wins, my Mummy says! Can you play? I can. Mummy says that I play so well because I got it from my granddad. Shall we play? Do you know, I am hungry."

We had no supper.”

Dyhema looked up. “Can you really play? Such a small child?”

“I am not small. And I often win.”

“Come on, let us try,” Dyhema said.

After a short time Dyhema understood that the boy really could play. Almost without thinking he made the right moves. After half an hour Dyhema became restless. The boy was winning! Really, the small boy seemed to be a better player than he was. And what annoyed him most was that while he did his utmost to win, the boy just played, without thinking it over. If Dyhema made a move, after a long time of consideration, the boy followed immediately, and it was always the right move. Perhaps it was because Dyhema was so annoyed that he suddenly made a wrong move. The boy smiled. “That is a bad move,” he said. “You had better take it back.”

“No, what I have done, I have done!”

The boy looked at him. Why was this old man so angry? He could not help it, could he? Was it because he could not win the game? A lot of people grew angry if they could not win. It was interesting. You learned most in a game that you lost. But this was an old man. Perhaps...

Suddenly the old servant came in. “Dyhema, what about the Christmas tart? Can I bring it in now?”

Dyhema looked very angry. “Go away with your tart!”

What a pity, the boy thought. He was so hungry. How angry the old man was. Was that only because he was not winning? Suddenly he said, “I should like to have some tart. I had no supper, you know.”

Dyhema only said, “Your turn to play.”

Sigurd sighed. Then he had an idea. He would let the old man win. He would make a bad move. It was not easy to do

The Chess Player

that. He sighed. It is Christmas Eve, he thought, I will do it. And he made his move.

Dyhema laughed. "A bad move. See, I can take your queen. Oh, I knew I could win. I have never yet lost a game!"

Sigurd blushed. This was not fair. He had always been told not to be sad if he lost, and not to be proud if he won. Suddenly he smiled. If I can cheer him up, let him win, he thought, and he said, "You can never be sure who wins before it is check-mate."

All the time Dyhema had looked at the boy. He had seen the tears come into his eyes after he had spoken. And he had seen the change, the smile. And then the words of the boy. It was as if he saw the Christ Child again. He remembered the words of the Christ Child, "Sometimes you think all is lost." He stood up. He walked up and down the room. The boy looked at him in surprise. Dyhema saw his life—his long life—in a new light. No mistakes? Open and right? There was a fault, a great fault. How could he have been so blind? My heart has been cold and unmoved, yet I've always thought I was such a good man, with all my good deeds. What a wretched old man I am. All this he felt deep in his heart and he saw his dream again, heard the words of the Christ Child, "God comes. He brings something new into life. Love!" That was it. Love!

Dyhema went to the boy. He put his hand on his shoulder. "You have won," he said, "you and the Christ Child."

The boy looked up at him in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

Old Farmer Dyhema smiled. "It does not matter, my son," he said. "It does not matter. But remember this: the Christ Child brings new life, yet all seemed so lost to man when Jesus was born. Born in a stable, poor and cold. All seemed to have been utterly lost in the end, my son. A cross was the end.

home for christmas

We must remember, Sigurd, remember the moment when God looked and said, 'It is the time.' And it was! The cross was not the end. And even today the Christ Child still comes to warm the hearts of men."

There was a hard knocking, and the door opened. The old servant said, "Tell me, Dyhema, where must I send this woman? She is here now."

"Bring her in here, of course."

"But you said..."

"It is my daughter! Didn't you know that? Bring her in here at once! Quick! And bring the Christmas tart. Quick, it is Christmas!"

The Chess Player