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Willibald's Trip to Heaven

Reimmichl

WILLIBALD KRAUTMANN and Christmas—these two things belonged together like a door and its hinges, like a clock and its face, like a bell and its tower. The whole year round he dreamed of and prepared for Christmas. In his lifetime he had carved more than a thousand figurines; he had built sixty manger scenes, and never once had he missed the annual crèche-makers' conference in Innsbruck.

Willibald had a round, stocky figure that was much too small for his ambitious soul. Often his ego would inflate itself, rise up, and whisper in his ear, "Willibald, don't forget that you are the greatest artist in the land; there is no other worthy of comparison. And this is common knowledge in heaven too: there is hardly another craftsman there as highly esteemed as you. When you die, the gates of Paradise shall be flung wide in welcome, and you shall enter in triumph. And just wait till you see the mansion that has been prepared for you!" Such little murmurings fell often into Willibald's ear, and he was always a ready listener.

Now it happened that just on the night before Christmas Eve, Willibald passed away peacefully, and found himself trotting up a steep road toward heaven, and talking to himself.

"Do you see, my dear old Willibald, how the Christ Child honors those whom he loves? He has fetched you home on Christmas Eve, just in time for the most beautiful feast day in heaven. Perhaps he wants you to set up the heavenly manger

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

scene. But it couldn't be—it's such short notice. Indeed, he's running very late, if that's the plan! Well, well, we will see..."

As Willibald thought about setting up a manger scene in heaven, excitement came over him like a fever, and his progress seemed to him much too slow. The climb was steep, he wasn't the youngest, and—being winter—it was bitterly cold. Often he stumbled or slipped backward several steps, which annoyed him, and he soon began to grumble.

"If they really wanted me in heaven, they could at least send a coach. That wouldn't be asking too much, would it? And it wouldn't have to be a coach-and-twelve; I'd be just as satisfied with a coach-and-four. And where are all the angels—what are they up to? Won't even one come out to meet me, Willibald Krautmann? Certainly I didn't expect a whole legion, but a few dozen archangels would have made a nice escort; indeed, it would only be proper. I'm no mere journeyman, after all; they ought to know that by now."

But in spite of all his muttering and grumbling, no angelic escort, nor any heavenly coach-and-twelve (or even four) appeared. There was nothing Willibald Krautmann could do but walk wearily onward. And so he continued in silence for a long time.

Darkness fell, the moon rose, and soon his strength began to ebb. He sat down on a large rock. Suddenly he noticed in the distance a wonderful city—the heavenly Jerusalem. It stood on a silver hill, and the walls, houses, and towers gleamed with gold. The city was illuminated with a light that was brighter than the sun, yet not half as blinding—it was mysteriously mild and soft. The windows and facades shimmered with reds and purples. Willibald gaped. Soon, however, the cold got to him, and he began to grumble again.

"Isn't anyone coming? Perhaps they are not quite finished

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

preparing my reception—or they think I'm still far off. Well, I'll let them know they are mistaken!”

So Willibald stepped onto a nearby star, raised himself to his full height, waved his big hat and shouted with all his might, “Hey you, up there!”

There was no response. Not even an echo. He waited.

Suddenly a little angel in a white gown fluttered up over the city walls, glanced down at him, and disappeared again.

“Ah,” he thought. “Now it's going to begin. Now all the bells are going to ring at once, and they'll set off the cannons.”

But a quarter of an hour passed, and then half an hour, and still nothing happened. At one point he was sure he heard the ringing of chimes, as sweet as the bells of the cathedral in Salzburg. He heard singing too, but it was far away. Willibald shook his head in disbelief. What did it mean?

Suddenly it dawned on him: they wanted to surprise him. He was supposed to go right up to the gate, and once he was there, the gates would open, and the heavenly hosts would stream out in all their splendor, and the angelic choirs would receive him with singing. “Yes,” he thought, “that's the only way they would welcome a person like me. To be sure, I've never been one for surprises, but if they really take pleasure in such nonsense up here, then in the name of goodness I won't spoil their joy.”

In good spirits once more, Willibald marched confidently up the last silvery rise, and stood expectantly right before the gate of heaven. Nothing happened. The gate did not spring open, no music broke forth, and no host streamed from within—nor even a single cherub. There was nothing but eerie silence. It was as if heaven were completely abandoned.

By now, Willibald was getting hot under the collar. A surprise is a surprise—that he could understand; and if the Heav-

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

only Father wanted to greet him with a host of little rascals, fine. He'd play hide-and-seek with them, if he had to. After all, he had often carved amusing little cherubs; he had had his fun too. But this was going a little too far—and if it went on, it would no longer be a joke.

“What do they really want me to do?” he wondered. “Stand here like a beggar, and ask for shelter? What do they think I am? A wayward tramp?” No, he really didn't need that—he, Willibald Krautmann, who had given his very life to Christmas and the Christ Child. “Oh well,” he sighed. “If they can wait, so can I. We'll see who runs out of patience first!”

And so he sat down on a stone near the gate, his chin in his hands. He began to feel rather sorry for himself. Then it happened: suddenly, from behind the arch of the closed gate, he heard hundreds of jubilant, high-pitched voices growing louder and louder. Then the gates of heaven opened, and a great crowd of cherubs pressed forward and spilled out. And who was standing at the threshold, but St. Peter himself, speaking in a deep voice and directing the multitude. “I knew it!” thought Willibald, overcome with relief.

Strangely, no one noticed him, and after a few moments, his joy turned to bewilderment. He coughed purposefully, and coughed again, trying to draw the angels' attention to him. It didn't work. Not a single angel so much as glanced in his direction. By now he was really at a loss.

Was it someone else they had come out to meet? Had they forgotten him altogether? Perhaps God, in all the flurry of holiday activities, had forgotten to announce that he, Willibald Krautmann, was due to arrive. “Well, then,” he decided, “I'll have to announce the news myself.”

Seeing a bell-pull to one side of the gate, he grasped it and threw his whole weight on the rope. It worked. A gong sound-

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

ed, and a head popped out from the window above him. It was St. Peter himself.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing, yanking on the bell-pull like that?” he asked. “And who are you, anyway?”

“It is I, Willibald Krautmann, well-known Tyrolean artist, carver of manger scenes.”

“Willibald Krautmann,” repeated St. Peter, bemused. “What an odd name! Never heard it before. I suppose you were looking for a place to stay?”

“Well, this is heaven, isn’t it?” Willibald threw back at him. “And I’ve been waiting out here for an hour already. Of course I’d like a place to stay.”

“Of course? It is not a matter of course at all. Let’s see what is written about you in the Book.”

St. Peter disappeared from the window, leaving Willibald open-mouthed. “Well, that was a friendly welcome! They don’t even know me up here? They have to look for my name in some stupid registry? The world pays with ingratitude; everyone knows that. But I wouldn’t have thought it was like that in heaven!”

Now St. Peter was back at the window, thumbing the pages of a large, black book. He took his time. “All right, here we are,” he said evenly, looking up. “But it says that you cannot enter.”

“What? I cannot enter! I’d just like to ask you for one good reason.”

“Of course. Just listen. You have been arrogant and vain, and proud of your own work. You have considered the art of others worthless in comparison to your own; you have acted as if no one else was as gifted as you.”

“Mr. Heavenly Gatekeeper, you’re making mountains out of molehills. You used to be a fisherman, so I’m not sur-

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

prised—but you just have no idea what an artist feels. And what about all the good I have done? In my lifetime I have carved more than half a hundred nativity scenes. I have awakened many dull hearts with my artistry, and brought much joy into the world; it has even been said that people could take an example from the integrity of my figures.”

“I’m sure that’s all true,” said St. Peter dryly. “But there is more—about your arrogance—that I can’t just scratch out.”

“Read on, then. I know I’m not the humblest. Everyone has his faults, and I’m not so conceited as to think that I’m an exception. But really, you’re making quite a fuss over nothing.”

“My good Mr. Krautmann, I’m only just getting started. There are other things recorded here. You have been impatient and irritable. When a piece of work wasn’t going smoothly, you flared up in such anger—”

“That was holy anger,” Willibald interrupted. “The Evil One could not stand my work, and often hid my tools or knocked over a scene, so that all the figures toppled onto the floor, and several broke. And then—why, certainly a righteous indignation would come over me.”

“The things you said were anything but quick prayers.”

“For goodness sake, Mr. Gatekeeper! Who thinks about what he says in the heat of the moment? You can’t weigh that sort of thing on a golden scale. Besides, I never did anything violent in my anger, like...like other people I know. I never struck off anyone’s ear.”

“So we’re trying to start a lawsuit?” asked Peter sharply, “Then you ought to find yourself an advocate.”

“Just let me in, and I’ll find one in a hurry.”

“No one impure can enter. You’ll have to find someone on earth to speak on your behalf.”

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

“On earth? That’s a fine to-do. It’s unfortunate, I know, but I really don’t know anyone that well down there. I was a busy man in my day; I had very little time for other people.”

“There you have it, exactly,” agreed St. Peter. “But now I’m going to read you the heaviest debt on your account: In the course of an entire lifetime you were so self-centered that you were unable to make even one friend through performing a work of mercy—not even one advocate to speak for you in heaven.”

“Now listen here!” Willibald retorted. “I spent my time and my money on the Christmas work I did.”

“No expense is so great as a gift from the heart, especially to someone in need.”

“Of course; but you can’t throw away money unless you’ve got extra. And I always gave something.”

“Always? Last year, on Christmas Eve, you turned away a widow with three hungry children from your door.”

“Well, that’s not hard to explain: I was working overtime on a late order, one that required a new design. And I had an entire nativity scene to re-gild. Such things cost money—and everything is sinfully expensive these days.”

“You still had enough left over to go out for a drink on Christmas Eve—and you did more than just quench your thirst.”

“Goodness, that was just a little celebration, a very small one—and that, because it was Christmas. Besides, the wines they sell nowadays are so cheap that you only have to drink one glass, and it goes to your head.”

“What? You drank two bottles of the most expensive vintage! You won’t get far with lying, Mr. Krautmann; that’s something I really detest.”

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

“Dear St. Peter, don't take it ill!” begged Willibald. “Little white lies like that come over the best people. I once read about someone who lied his way out of a tight spot three times in one night.”

“And wept for it the rest of his life, while you cover up and explain away your sins,” thundered St. Peter. “I've had it; that's the end of my patience. Now get out of here!” And he slammed the window shut.

For the first time Willibald realized that he was really in a fix, and he decided to try another tack. Trembling, he reached up to knock on the window, and when he found he wasn't tall enough, hung his head and begged and whined like a little boy. St. Peter ignored him. Next he tried the bell-pull again, though this time he didn't yank at the rope, but pulled on it gently. Still no response.

What should he do now, he wondered? Hopeless—and dead tired—he stumbled along the wall, looking for a place to lie down and sleep. He had not gone far when he came to a small window that bathed the ground below it in a golden light. Curious, he peered in, and—dear God! What a celebration was going on inside! It was absolutely heavenly: hundreds of angels were dancing in a sea of light and joy.

Ecstatic, Willibald drank in the scene, and as he did the scales fell from his eyes: he saw that the source of all that light and joy was love, the unending delight of the soul. And to think that he was seeing only a fraction of it all! Perhaps only a thousandth part of it!

Then a rush of heavenly music rose and swept over him—the voices of at least a million angels chanting and singing in praise of God. “No one on earth would believe me if I described this,” thought Willibald to himself. “No one on earth has even imagined such music!”

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

Ecstatic, he began to sway with the music. Suddenly his chest tightened. He felt hot and breathless. Grasping at his heart, he panicked. His breast burned with such longing to be part of the heavenly scene in front of him that he was sure he was going to die. He wanted to cry out, but couldn't; he wanted to sing, but his mouth was dry. And so he wept, from the depths of his heart. "Forgive my sins!" he sobbed piteously. "Never again will I be haughty or cruel! Forgive me! Please forgive me!"

Willibald wept softly at first, then louder, and then very loudly, yelling and howling. He pressed his head against the windowpane so hard that the glass shone with his tears.

Crack! Suddenly the window shattered and gave way, and he lost his balance, and found himself falling. Down, down, and farther down he fell, into what seemed a bottomless pit. . . And now he heard a familiar voice: "For God's sake, stop your yelling; what on earth is going on?" He opened his eyes. There he was, lying in his warm bed, and beside him his bleary-eyed wife, who was shaking him by the shoulder.

"What's the matter with you, you silly fool?" cried his wife. "You've been howling and carrying on like a hog at the butcher's!"

"Oh—I have been in heaven!" he replied.

"In heaven? A fine heaven, where you have to whimper and yelp like that."

"Quiet, woman, and I'll tell you all about it."

Willibald Krautmann did not tell his wife everything; but he did become more thoughtful. During the Christmas holidays he lost a big sum of money—at least his wife believed he had lost it. In fact, he gave it to the widow he had turned away the year before. He softened in other ways, too, and was no longer rude or impatient or unkind.

Willibald's Trip to Heaven

To his next-door neighbor, who asked why, Willibald explained very simply that this year he had finally begun to understand what Christmas was really about. But he also told this neighbor, who was his best friend, the whole story of his trip to heaven.

This free-book is an excerpt from Home for Christmas, available from Orbis Books.

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