

## Winter Short Stories

### Gluck's Visitor

by John Ruskin

It was drawing toward winter, and very cold weather, when one day Gluck's two older brothers had gone out, with their usual warning to little Gluck, who was left to mind the roast, that he was to let nobody in and give nothing out. Gluck sat down quite close to the fire, for it was raining very hard. He turned and turned, and the roast got nice and brown.

"What a pity," thought Gluck, "that my brothers never ask anybody to dinner. I'm sure, when they have such a nice piece of mutton as this, it would do their hearts good to have somebody to eat it with them." Just as he spoke there came a double knock at the house door, yet heavy and dull, as though the knocker had been tied up. "It must be the wind," said Gluck; "nobody else would venture to knock double knocks at our door."

No; it wasn't the wind. There it came again very hard, and what was particularly astounding the knocker seemed to be in a hurry, and not to be in the least afraid of the consequences. Gluck put his head out the window to see who it was.

It was the most extraordinary looking little gentleman he had ever seen in his life. He had a very large nose, slightly brass-colored; his cheeks were very round and very red; his eyes twinkled merrily through long, silky eyelashes; his mustaches curled twice round like a corkscrew on each side of his mouth, and his hair, of a curious mixed pepper-and-salt color, descended far over his shoulders. He was about four feet six in height, and wore a conical pointed cap of nearly the same altitude, decorated with a black feather some three feet long. He wore an enormous black, glossy-looking cloak, which must have been very much too long in calm weather, as the wind carried it clear out from the wearer's shoulders to about four times his own length.

Gluck was so perfectly paralyzed by the appearance of his visitor that he remained fixed, without uttering a word, until the old gentleman turned round to look after his fly-away cloak. In so doing he caught sight of Gluck's little yellow head jammed in the window, with its mouth and eyes very wide open indeed.

"Hello!" said the little gentleman, "that's not the way to answer the door. I'm wet; let me in." To do the little gentleman justice, he was wet. His feather hung down

between his legs like a beaten puppy's tail, dripping like an umbrella; and from the end of his mustaches the water was running into his waistcoat pockets, and out again like a mill stream.

"I'm very sorry" said Gluck, "but I really can't."

"Can't what?" said the old gentleman.

"I can't let you in, sir. My brothers would beat me to death, sir, if I thought of such a thing. What do you want, sir?"

"Want?" said the old gentleman. "I want fire and shelter; and there's your great fire there blazing, crackling, and dancing on the walls, with nobody to feel it. Let me in, I say."

Gluck had had his head, by this time, so long out of the window that he began to feel it was really unpleasantly cold. When he turned and saw the beautiful fire rustling and roaring, and throwing long, bright tongues up the chimney, as if it were licking its chops at the savory smell of the leg of mutton, his heart melted within him that it should be burning away for nothing.

"He does look very wet," said little Gluck; "I'll just let him in for a quarter of an hour."

As the little gentleman walked in, there came a gust of wind through the house that made the old chimney totter.

"That's a good boy. Never mind your brothers. I'll talk to them."

"Pray, sir, don't do any such thing," said Gluck. "I can't let you stay till they come; they'd be the death of me."

"Dear me," said the old gentleman, "I'm sorry to hear that. How long may I stay?"

"Only till the mutton is done, sir," replied Gluck, "and it's very brown." Then the old gentleman walked into the kitchen and sat himself down on the hob, with the top of his cap up the chimney, for it was much too high for the roof.

"You'll soon dry there; sir," said Gluck, and sat down again to turn the mutton. But the old gentleman did not dry there, but went on drip, drip, dripping among the cinders, so that the fire fizzed and sputtered and began to look very black and uncomfortable. Never was such a cloak; every fold in it ran like a gutter.

"I beg pardon, sir," said Gluck, at length, after watching the water spreading in long, quicksilver-like streams over the

floor; "mayn't I take your cloak?"

"No, thank you," said the old gentleman.

"Your cap, sir?"

"I am all right, thank you," said the old gentleman, rather gruffly.

"But-sir-I'm very sorry," said Gluck, hesitatingly, "but-really-sir-you're putting the fire out."

"It'll take longer to do the mutton, then."

Gluck was very much puzzled by the behavior of his guest; it was such a strange mixture of coolness and humility.

"That mutton looks very nice," said the old gentleman.

"Can't you give me a little bit?"

"Impossible, sir," said Gluck.

"I'm very hungry," continued the old gentleman; "I've had nothing to eat yesterday nor to-day. They surely couldn't miss a bit from the knuckle!"

He spoke in so very melancholy a tone that it quite melted

Gluck's heart.

"They promised me one slice to-day, sir," said he; "I can give you that, but no more."

"That's a good boy," said the old gentleman again.

"I don't care if I do get beaten for it," thought Gluck.

Just as he had cut a large slice out of the mutton, there came a tremendous rap at the door. The old gentleman jumped; Gluck fitted the slice into the mutton again, and ran to open the door.

"What did you keep us waiting in the rain for?" said Schwartz, as he walked in, throwing his umbrella in Gluck's face.

"Aye; what for, indeed, you little vagabond?" said Hans, administering an educational box on the ear, as he followed his brother.

"Bless my soul!" said Schwartz, when he opened the door.

"Amen," said the little gentleman, who had taken his cap off, and was standing in the middle of the kitchen, bowing with the utmost velocity.

"Who's that?" said Schwartz, catching up a rolling-pin, and turning fiercely to Gluck.

"I don't know, indeed, brother," said Gluck, in great terror.

"How did he get in?" roared Schwartz.

"My dear brother, he was so very wet!"

The rolling-pin was descending on Gluck's head; but, at that instant, the old gentleman interposed his conical cap, on which it crashed with a shock that shook the water out of it all over the room. What was very odd, the rolling-pin no sooner touched the cap, than it flew out of Schwartz's hand, spinning like a straw in a high wind, and fell into the corner at the farther end of the room.

"Who are you sir?" demanded Schwartz.

"What's your business?" snarled Hans.

"I'm a poor old man, sir," the little gentleman began, very modestly, "and I saw your fire through the window, and begged shelter for a quarter of an hour."

"Have the goodness to walk out again, then," said Schwartz.

"We've quite enough water in our kitchen, without making it

a drying house."

"It's a very cold day, sir, to turn an old man out in, sir; look at my gray hairs."

"Aye!" said Hans, "there are enough of them to keep you warm. Walk!"

"I'm very, very hungry, sir; couldn't you spare me a bit of bread before I go?"

"Bread, indeed!" said Schwartz; "do you suppose we've nothing to do with our bread but to give it to such fellows as you?"

"Why don't you sell your feather?" said Hans, sneeringly. "Out with you."

"A little bit," said the old gentleman.

"Be off!" said Schwartz.

"Pray, gentlemen."

"Off!" cried Hans, seizing him by the collar. But he had no sooner touched the old gentleman's collar than away he went after the rolling-pin, spinning round and round, till he

fell into the corner on the top of it.

Then Schwartz was very angry, and ran at the old gentleman to turn him out. But he also had hardly touched him, when away he went after Hans and the rolling-pin, and hit his head against the wall as he tumbled into the corner. And so there they lay, all three.

Then the old gentleman spun himself round until his long cloak was all wound neatly about him, clapped his cap on his head, very much on one side, gave a twist to his corkscrew mustaches, and replied, with perfect coolness: "Gentlemen, I wish you a very good morning. At twelve o'clock to-night, I'll call again."