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## The Book of Mormon and I

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**Abstract:** A first person narrative testimonial of a man in Germany who found a friend in the Book of Mormon on a cold, lonely, and hopeless night. Following World War I, the man first found himself in despair, then found that the Book of Mormon offered him hope and comfort.

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## The Book of Mormon and I

*By Dr. C. F. J. Bechler*

[The author, who is not a member of the Church, is of a well-to-do family, and was a student in a leading German university years ago, when two or three "Mormon" elders from Salt Lake City, were in Koenigsberg, Germany, on a mission, and there became acquainted with him. One of them presented him with a Book of Mormon and with copies of the *Era*. What has happened since is made plain in this little classic sent by request of the author through the elder to the *Improvement Era* for publication.—*Editors.*]

It sounds a bit arrogant, that "I," does it not? There is, so to say, no one in the U. S. A. who knows me. Only in Utah there are some friends who, reading my name, bring to their memories the figure of a chap they met many years ago somewhere in Germany. I think it is my duty therefore to introduce myself. This introduction will be a short one. It is not of contradiction: I am not a "Mormon," and yet there is a Book of Mormon in my possession, bearing my name in golden letters on its dark leather cover. This book has its story. It is a very simple one. Here it is:

It was given to me in remembrance of many happy hours spent together with young friends—"Mormon" elders—in Koenigsberg in 1909-10. And now in this cold, dark December night it is lying on my writing desk. It is so calm and quiet in my room, peace reigning within its walls. The listless breathing of hours that pass by is only interrupted by a regular "tick-tock" coming from out a dark corner, and the irregular beating of falling drops against my panes, for the first snow is melting away.

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Slowly my left hand gets over to the book. My fingers touch it. There is so much love in my patting the soft leather. I lean back—to dream. I see eyes I liked to meet in those happy days, and I hear a voice that would then go to my heart—"Doc., old chap, there will come a time when you need a friend and help—then take this book. God bless you, my friend!" There comes a film over my eyes. I hear the shrill whistle of the engine. There is a hand-waving farewell—and my "Mormon" friend has gone.

With me stayed the Book of Mormon. I was glad to have it, for I am a bibliophil and like, therefore, books in good bindings. But I did not read much in the book. I tried to do so at first, but I soon put it aside; it is no novel, it contains no interesting story that keeps you to your place till you have finished it. So we separated. But now and then, once or twice a year, when dusting my books it fell into my hands. Then I would take it and smile at it, as you smile at a person you meet after a long time. I would talk to it, ask it a question and wait in vain for an answer. "Does it not understand you, or do you not understand it?" For me, books are no dead things. They have a soul, they live. They are your friends, the truest you can have, for they never betray you. They talk to you. So when they come to me, I make friends with them, before I lock them away, and yet, strange to confess, this Book of Mormon, though it came from the best friend I had, though it was dear to me, remained a stranger to me for many years. I could not talk to it, it did not answer, remained silent and cold.

War broke out. I had instantly to leave for the front. I could not go without a friend, a book. So I began to choose among my books. And there the Book of Mormon crossed my way. For some time I held it in my hands. A feeling quite new to me came, there was a change—something that had stood between the Book and me had fallen. There was a voice within me that rang: "No stranger any more." But the book seemed to smile a bitter smile and to say: "And yet, no friend." So, with a sigh, I put it away and took the Bible, "Faust" and "Nietzsche."

Time rolled on. I got wounded several times. Revolution came, the Treaty of Versailles followed. The Poles occupied old German provinces. A horrible time, and just then it happened.

It was a chilly February night, past midnight. I could find no rest. My heart was too weary. So I wandered up and down my room. Dark as the starless night were my thoughts, dark as the stormy nature without my future. Lonely, lonely without any friend. I stopped wandering, leaned against my book shelves. Bitter sorrow in my heart, I looked at my silent friends.

I heard them say: "Come to us, take us." But when I opened to take one of them, they were all silent, no sound, no word, no friend. A bitter pang shot up. "You leave me too?" No answer. Then I felt an endless pain. Given up! And I was going to step back and to bury myself in my loneliness, when I heard a voice: "Do take me." I stopped and turned back. There was silence. Did I hear right? But then came the same voice once more, "Do take me—my time has come."

"You!" I exclaimed in wonder, when I had followed the command of the voice, for I held the Book of Mormon. "Yes," it said simply. I did not dare ask more, for something like awe before this small volume had come over me. Together we went to my armchair. And there I opened it and began to read. It was the fifth chapter of the Book of Jacob, the story of the master of the vineyard who went forth and saw that his tame olive tree had begun to decay. The story struck my heart. There was too much in it that made me think of my poor life and of what was around me. I had to think a long time over what I had read. Slowly, without reading, I turned the pages over till I came to the end of the Book. My eyes' planless wandering over the lines fell upon Moroni x:22: "And if ye have no hope, ye must needs be in despair." I was in despair, for I had lost all hope. Never in all those bitter days had I felt that I lacked hope so much as then when the Book told it to me.

"Hope," I cried, "where is hope? Do tell me."

And the book answered: "With me is faith, and where there is faith, there is hope, my friend!"

"Friend?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes, you are my friend now!"

Soft was that voice and clear as the bubbling of water in a brooklet with small stones. Of a sudden there came joy, that deep joy I had not felt for a long time.

"O you, how I thank you," and I pressed it to my heart, for there was hope in me. A long dreamless sleep followed. When I awoke I felt rich, for I had won a friend.

But that same day I had to flee. The Poles were after me to catch him who had tried to defend the right cause. I happily escaped and came that same night to the Free City of Danzig, my native town. I arrived in a cold darkness. No one to bid a hearty welcome, lonely and abandoned, I waited for someone to come. But then I gave it up with a sigh and entered the dark and solitary streets. All looked so unfriendly. An uncanny darkness reigned, rare lamps giving a feeble light. A cold rain fell in killing monotony. A bad welcome of my dear old town. Bitter, bitter were the thoughts in my heart, and

slowly but steady, the feeling of despair, born anew in that loneliness, crept up from behind. I had come to the old and mighty Cathedral. Icy wind blew round its huge cold corners. It made me shiver. I hastened on. A lamp flickered up. I knew the spot. It was the entrance door, which I had passed so many times, a child, a boy, a man. There was a sudden voice within that bade me stop. I stood and looked around. In the dim light of the far-off lantern stood the oldest statue you can find. Hundreds of years ago it was given to the Cathedral by a pious man who hoped to reconcile his God through this gift: The Virgin holding her God Son in her arms. I stepped near and looked up. She smiled to me as she had smiled to those who had come to her Cathedral for all the years. But then I saw her move, give a sigh, I obeyed and slowly I brought my hand to that same place where she held hers, near the heart. When my fingers touched the place, I felt something hard that was in my jacket pocket, something that made my heart leap with joy and made me forget cold and darkness and loneliness and despair. I knew what it was. Out I took it in haste and joy. The Book of Mormon was in my hands. I had put it into my pocket the last night, and so it had come with me. Out of all friends, the only one who had not left me.

What then follows remains my secret, for there are things you never talk of to anyone. You never confess in written words—but since that time the Book of Mormon is on my writing desk, and I often take it along with me on lonely walks—

“Blessed the man who has found a friend.”

*Danzig, Germany*

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### Prayer of a “Mormon” Boy

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*Kind Heavenly Father.*—For one who dared to give me mortal life—my Mother, I thank thee. For an honest Daddy, fearless enough to undertake the task of rearing me; unselfish enough to forego the luxuries of life and share his all with me, I thank thee. For parents who showed their gratitude for life by 'giving me a goodly number of brothers and sisters, I return thee thanks.

For thy beloved Son who gave his life for me that I might have eternal life; and to Thee—Thou who suffered thine Only Begotten in the flesh to die 'for my redemption, I am grateful. For a knowledge of this life's purposes and the meaning of its experiences while journeying here, 'accept my gratitude. Father in heaven, for life—I thank thee.