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# THE SEVERED HAND

**By Wilhelm Hauff**

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**1869**

I was born in Constantinople; my father was a dragoman at the Porte, and besides, carried on a fairly lucrative business in sweet-scented perfumes and silk goods. He gave me a good education; he partly instructed me himself, and also had me instructed by one of our priests. He at first intended me to succeed him in business one day, but as I showed greater aptitude than he had expected, he destined me, on the advice of his friends, to be a doctor; for if a doctor has learned a little more than the ordinary charlatan, he can make his fortune in Constantinople. Many Franks frequented our house, and one of them persuaded my father to allow me to travel to his native land to the city of Paris, where such things could be best acquired and free of charge. He wished, however, to take me with himself gratuitously on his journey home. My father, who had also travelled in his youth, agreed, and the Frank told me to hold myself in readiness three months hence. I was beside myself with joy at the idea of seeing foreign countries, and eagerly awaited the moment when we should embark. The Frank had at last concluded his business and prepared himself for the journey. On the evening before our departure my father led me into his little bedroom. There I saw splendid dresses and arms lying on the table. My looks were however chiefly attracted to an immense heap of gold, for I had never before seen so much collected together.

My father embraced me and said: "Behold, my son, I have procured for thee clothes for the journey. These weapons are thine; they are the same which thy grandfather hung around me when I went abroad. I know that thou canst use them aright; but only make use of them when thou art attacked; on such occasions, however, defend thyself bravely. My property is not large; behold I have divided it into three parts, one part for thee, another for my support and spare money, but the third is to me a sacred and untouched property, it is for thee in the hour of need." Thus spoke my old father, tears standing in his eyes, perhaps from some foreboding, for I never saw him again.

The journey passed off very well; we had soon reached the land of the Franks, and six days later we arrived in the large city of Paris. There my Frankish friend hired a room for me, and advised me to spend wisely my money, which amounted in all to two thousand dollars. I lived three years in this city, and learned what is necessary for a skilful doctor to know. I should not, however, be stating the truth if I said that I liked being there, for the customs of this nation displeased me; besides, I had only a few chosen friends there, and these were noble young men.

The longing after home at last possessed me mightily; during the whole of that time I had not heard anything from my father, and I therefore seized a favorable opportunity of reaching home. An embassy from France left for Turkey. I acted as surgeon to the suite of the Ambassador and arrived happily in Stamboul. My father's house was locked, and the neighbors, who were surprised on seeing me, told me my father had died two months ago. The priest who had instructed me in my youth brought me the key; alone and desolate I entered the empty house. All was still in the same position as my father had left it, only the gold which I was to inherit was gone. I questioned the priest about it, and he, bowing, said: "Your father died a saint, for he has bequeathed his gold to the Church." This was and remained inexplicable to me. However, what could I do? I had no witness against the priest, and had to be glad that he had not considered the house and the goods of my father as a bequest. This was the first misfortune that I encountered. Henceforth nothing but ill-luck attended me. My reputation as doctor would not spread at all, because I was ashamed to act the charlatan; and I felt everywhere the want of the recommendation of my father, who would have introduced me to the richest and most distinguished, but who now no longer thought of the poor Zaleukos! The goods of my father also had no sale, for his customers had deserted him after his death, and new ones are only to be got slowly.

Thus when I was one day meditating sadly over my position, it occurred to me that I had often seen in France men of my nation travelling through the country exhibiting their goods in the markets of the towns. I remembered that the people liked to buy of them, because they came from abroad, and that such a business would be most lucrative. Immediately I resolved what to do. I disposed of my father's house, gave part of the money to a trusty friend to keep for me, and with the rest I bought what are very rare in France, shawls, silk goods, ointments, and oils, took a berth on board a ship, and thus entered upon my second journey to the land of the Franks. It seemed as if fortune had favored me again as soon as I had turned my back upon the Castles of the Dardanelles. Our journey was short and successful. I travelled through the large and small towns of the Franks, and found everywhere willing buyers of my goods. My friend in Stamboul always sent me fresh stores, and my wealth increased day by day. When I had saved at last so much that I thought I might venture on a greater undertaking, I travelled with my goods to Italy. I must however confess to something, which brought me not a little money: I also employed my knowledge of physic. On reaching a town, I had it published that a Greek physician had arrived, who had already healed many; and in fact my balsam and medicine gained me many a sequin. Thus I had at length reached the city of Florence in Italy.

I resolved upon remaining in this town for some time, partly because I liked it so well, partly also because I wished to recruit myself from the exertions of my travels. I hired a vaulted shop, in that part of the town called Sta. Croce, and not far from this a couple of nice rooms at an inn, leading out upon a balcony. I immediately had my bills circulated, which announced me to be both physician and merchant. Scarcely had I opened my shop when I was besieged by buyers, and in spite of my high prices I sold more than any one else, because I was obliging and friendly towards my customers. Thus I had already lived four days happily in Florence, when one evening, as I was about to close my vaulted room, and on examining once more the contents of my ointment boxes, as I was in the habit of doing, I found in one of the small boxes a piece of paper, which I did not remember to have put into it.

I unfolded the paper, and found in it an invitation to be on the bridge which is called Ponto Vecchio that night exactly at midnight. I was thinking for a long time as to who it might be who had invited me there; and not knowing a single soul in Florence, I thought perhaps I should be secretly conducted to a patient, a thing which had already often occurred. I therefore determined to proceed thither, but took care to gird on the sword which my father had once presented to me. When it was close upon midnight I set out on my journey, and soon reached the Ponte Vecchio. I found the bridge deserted, and determined to await the appearance of him who called me. It was a cold night; the moon shone brightly, and I looked down upon the waves of the Arno, which sparkled far away in the moonlight. It was now striking twelve o'clock from all the churches of the city, when I looked up and saw a tall man standing before me completely covered in a scarlet cloak, one end of which hid his face.

At first I was somewhat frightened, because he had made his appearance so suddenly; but was however myself again shortly afterwards, and said: "If it is you who have ordered me here, say what you want?" The man dressed in scarlet turned round and said in an undertone:

"Follow!" At this, however, I felt a little timid to go alone with this stranger. I stood still and said: "Not so, sir, kindly first tell me where; you might also let me see your countenance a little, in order to convince me that you wish me no harm." The red one, however, did not seem to pay any attention to this. "If thou art unwilling, Zaleukos, remain," he replied, and continued his way. I grew angry. "Do you think," I exclaimed, "a man like myself allows himself to be made a fool of, and to have waited on this cold night for nothing?"

In three bounds I had reached him, seized him by his cloak, and cried still louder, whilst laying hold of my sabre with my other hand. His cloak, however, remained in my hand, and the stranger had disappeared round the nearest corner. I became calmer by degrees. I had the cloak at any rate, and it was this which would give me the key to this remarkable adventure. I put it on and continued my way home. When I was at a distance of about a hundred paces from it, some one brushed very closely by me and whispered in the language of the Franks: "Take care, Count, nothing can be done to-night." Before I had time, however, to turn round, this somebody had passed, and I merely saw a shadow hovering along the houses. I perceived that these words did not concern me, but rather the cloak, yet it gave me no explanation concerning the affair. On the following morning I considered what was to be done. At first I had intended to have the cloak cried in the streets, as if I had found it. But then the stranger might send for it by a third person, and thus no light would be thrown upon the matter. Whilst I was thus thinking, I examined the cloak more closely. It was made of thick Genoese velvet, scarlet in color, edged with Astrachan fur and richly embroidered with gold. The magnificent appearance of the cloak put a thought into my mind which I resolved to carry out.

I carried it into my shop and exposed it for sale, but placed such a high price upon it that I was sure nobody would buy it. My object in this was to scrutinize everybody sharply who might ask for the fur cloak; for the figure of the stranger, which I had seen but superficially, though with some certainty, after the loss of the cloak, I should recognize amongst a thousand. There were many would-be purchasers for the cloak, the

extraordinary beauty of which attracted everybody; but none resembled the stranger in the slightest degree, and nobody was willing to pay such a high price as two hundred sequins for it. What astonished me was that on asking somebody or other if there was not such a cloak in Florence, they all answered "No," and assured me they never had seen so precious and tasteful a piece of work.

Evening was drawing near, when at last a young man appeared, who had already been to my place, and who had also offered me a great deal for the cloak. He threw a purse with sequins upon the table, and exclaimed: "Of a truth, Zaleukos, I must have thy cloak, should I turn into a beggar over it!" He immediately began to count his pieces of gold. I was in a dangerous position: I had only exposed the cloak, in order merely to attract the attention of my stranger, and now a young fool came to pay an immense price for it. However, what could I do? I yielded; for on the other hand I was delighted at the idea of being so handsomely recompensed for my nocturnal adventure.

The young man put the cloak around him and went away, but on reaching the threshold he returned; whilst unfastening a piece of paper which had been tied to the cloak, and throwing it towards me, he exclaimed: "Here, Zaleukos, hangs something which I dare say does not belong to the cloak." I picked up the piece of paper carelessly, but behold, on it these words were written: "Bring the cloak at the appointed hour to-night to the Ponte Vecchio, four hundred sequins are thine." I stood thunderstruck. Thus I had lost my fortune and completely missed my aim! Yet I did not think long. I picked up the two hundred sequins, jumped after the one who had bought the cloak, and said: "Dear friend, take back your sequins, and give me the cloak; I cannot possibly part with it." He first regarded the matter as a joke; but when he saw that I was in earnest, he became angry at my demand, called me a fool, and finally it came to blows.

However, I was fortunate enough to wrench the cloak from him in the scuffle, and was about to run away with it, when the young man called the police to his assistance, and we both appeared before the judge. The latter was much surprised at the accusation, and adjudicated the cloak in favor of my adversary. I offered the young man twenty, fifty, eighty, even a hundred sequins in addition to his two hundred, if he would part with the cloak. What my entreaties could not do, my gold did. He accepted it. I, however, went away with the cloak triumphantly, and had to appear to the whole town of Florence as a madman. I did not care, however, about the opinion of the people; I knew better than they that I profited after all by the bargain.

Impatiently I awaited the night. At the same hour as before I went with the Cloak under my arm towards the Ponte Vecchio. With the last stroke of twelve the figure appeared out of the darkness, and came towards me. It was unmistakably the man whom I had seen yesterday. "Hast thou the cloak?" he asked me. "Yes, sir," I replied; "but it cost me a hundred sequins ready money." "I know it," replied the other. "Look here, here are four hundred." He went with me towards the wide balustrade of the bridge, and counted out the money. There were four hundred; they sparkled magnificently in the moonlight; their glitter rejoiced my heart. Alas, I did not anticipate that this would be its last joy. I put the money into my pocket, and was desirous of thoroughly looking at my kind and unknown stranger; but he wore a mask, through which dark eyes stared at me frightfully. "I thank you, sir, for your kindness," I said to him; "what else do you require of me? I tell you beforehand it must be an honorable transaction." "There is no occasion for alarm," he replied, whilst winding the cloak around his shoulders; "I require your assistance as surgeon, not for one alive, but dead."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, full of surprise. "I arrived with my sister from abroad," he said, and beckoned me at the same time to follow him. "I lived here with her at the house of a friend. My sister died yesterday suddenly of a disease, and my relatives wish to bury her to-morrow. According to an old custom of our family all are to be buried in the tomb of our ancestors; many, notwithstanding, who died in foreign countries are buried there and embalmed. I do not grudge my relatives her body, but for my father I want at least the head of his daughter, in order that he may see her once more." This custom of severing the heads of beloved relatives appeared to me somewhat awful, yet I did not dare to object to it lest I should offend the stranger. I told him that I was acquainted with the embalming of the dead, and begged him to conduct me to the deceased. Yet I could not help asking him why all this must be done so mysteriously and at night? He answered me that his relatives, who considered his intention horrible, objected to it by daylight; if only the head were severed, then they could say no more about it; although he might have brought me the head, yet a natural feeling had prevented him from severing it himself.

In the meantime we had reached a large, splendid house. My companion pointed it out to me as the end of our nocturnal walk. We passed the principal entrance of the house, entered a little door, which the stranger carefully locked behind him, and now ascended in the dark a narrow spiral staircase. It led towards a dimly lighted passage, out of which we entered a room lighted by a lamp fastened to the ceiling.

In this room was a bed, on which the corpse lay. The stranger turned aside his face, evidently endeavoring to hide his tears. He pointed towards the bed, telling me to do my business well and quickly, and left the room.

I took my instruments, which I as surgeon always carried about with me, and approached the bed. Only the head of the corpse was visible, and it was so beautiful that I experienced involuntarily the deepest sympathy. Dark hair hung down in long plaits, the features were pale, the eyes closed. At first I made an incision into the skin, after the manner of surgeons when amputating a limb. I then took my sharpest knife, and with one stroke cut the throat. But oh, horror! The dead opened her eyes, but immediately closed them again, and with a deep sigh she now seemed to breathe her last. At the same moment a stream of hot blood shot towards me from the wound. I was convinced that the poor creature had been killed by me. That she was dead there was no doubt, for there was no recovery from this wound. I stood for some minutes in painful anguish at what had happened. Had the "red-cloak" deceived me, or had his sister perhaps merely been apparently dead? The latter seemed to me more likely. But I dare not tell the brother of the deceased that perhaps a little less deliberate cut might have awakened her without killing her; therefore I wished to sever the head completely; but once more the dying woman groaned, stretched herself out in painful movements, and died.

Fright overpowered me, and, shuddering, I hastened out of the room. But outside in the passage it was dark; for the light was out, no trace of my companion was to be seen, and I was obliged, haphazard, to feel my way in the dark along the wall, in order to reach the staircase. I discovered it at last and descended, partly falling and partly gliding. But there was not a soul downstairs. I merely found the door ajar, and

breathed freer on reaching the street, for I had felt very strange inside the house. Urged on by terror, I rushed towards my dwelling-place, and buried myself in the cushions of my bed, in order to forget the terrible thing that I had done.

But sleep deserted me, and only the morning admonished me again to take courage. It seemed to me probable that the man who had induced me to commit this nefarious deed, as it now appeared to me, might not denounce me. I immediately resolved to set to work in my vaulted room, and if possible to assume an indifferent look. But alas! an additional circumstance, which I only now noticed, increased my anxiety still more. My cap and my girdle, as well as my instruments, were wanting, and I was uncertain as to whether I had left them in the room of the murdered girl, or whether I had lost them in my flight. The former seemed indeed the more likely, and thus I could easily be discovered as the murderer.

At the accustomed hour I opened my vaulted room. My neighbor came in, as was his wont every morning, for he was a talkative man. "Well," he said, "what do you say about the terrible affair which has occurred during the night?" I pretended not to know anything. "What, do you not know what is known all over the town? Are you not aware that the loveliest flower in Florence, Bianca, the Governor's daughter, was murdered last night? I saw her only yesterday driving through the streets in so cheerful a manner with her intended one, for to-day the marriage was to have taken place." I felt deeply wounded at each word of my neighbor. Many a time my torment was renewed, for every one of my customers told me of the affair, each one more ghastly than the other, and yet nobody could relate anything more terrible than that which I had seen myself.

About mid-day a police-officer entered my shop and requested me to send the people away. "Signor Zaleukos," he said, producing the things which I had missed, "do these things belong to you?" I was thinking as to whether I should not entirely repudiate them, but on seeing through the door, which stood ajar, my landlord and several acquaintances, I determined not to aggravate the affair by telling a lie, and acknowledged myself as the owner of the things. The police-officer asked me to follow him, and led me towards a large building which I soon recognized as the prison. There he showed me into a room meanwhile.

My situation was terrible, as I thought of it in my solitude. The idea of having committed a murder, unintentionally, constantly presented itself to my mind. I also could not conceal from myself that the glitter of the gold had captivated my feelings, otherwise I should not have fallen blindly into the trap. Two hours after my arrest I was led out of my cell. I descended several steps until at last I reached a great hall. Around a long table draped in black were seated twelve men, mostly old men. There were benches along the sides of the hall, filled with the most distinguished of Florence. The galleries, which were above, were thickly crowded with spectators. When I had stepped towards the table covered with black cloth, a man with a gloomy and sad countenance rose; it was the Governor. He said to the assembly that he as the father in this affair could not sentence, and that he resigned his place on this occasion to the eldest of the Senators. The eldest of the Senators was an old man at least ninety years of age. He stood in a bent attitude, and his temples were covered with thin white hair, but his eyes were as yet very fiery, and his voice powerful and weighty. He commenced by asking me whether I confessed to the murder. I requested him to allow me to speak, and related undauntedly and with a clear voice what I had done, and what I knew.

I noticed that the Governor, during my recital, at one time turned pale, and at another time red. When I had finished, he rose angrily: "What, wretch!" he exclaimed, "dost thou even dare to impute a crime which thou hast committed from greediness to another?" The Senator reprimanded him for his interruption, since he had voluntarily renounced his right; besides it was not clear that I did the deed from greediness, for, according to his own statement, nothing had been stolen from the victim. He even went further. He told the Governor that he must give an account of the early life of his daughter, for then only it would be possible to decide whether I had spoken the truth or not. At the same time he adjourned the court for the day, in order, as he said, to consult the papers of the deceased, which the Governor would give him. I was again taken back to my prison, where I spent a wretched day, always fervently wishing that a link between the deceased and the "red-cloak" might be discovered. Full of hope, I entered the Court of Justice the next day. Several letters were lying upon the table. The old Senator asked me whether they were in my handwriting. I looked at them and noticed that they must have been written by the same hand as the other two papers which I had received. I communicated this to the Senators, but no attention was paid to it, and they told me that I might have written both, for the signature of the letters was undoubtedly a Z., the first letter of my name. The letters, however, contained threats against the deceased, and warnings against the marriage which she was about to contract.

The Governor seemed to have given extraordinary information concerning me, for I was treated with more suspicion and rigor on this day. I referred, to justify myself, to my papers which must be in my room, but was told they had been looked for without success. Thus at the conclusion of this sitting all hope vanished, and on being brought into the Court the third day, judgment was pronounced on me. I was convicted of wilful murder and condemned to death. Things had come to such a pass! Deserted by all that was precious to me upon earth, far away from home, I was to die innocently in the bloom of my life.

On the evening of this terrible day which had decided my fate, I was sitting in my lonely cell, my hopes were gone, my thoughts steadfastly fixed upon death, when the door of my prison opened, and in came a man, who for a long time looked at me silently. "Is it thus I find you again, Zaleukos?" he said. I had not recognized him by the dim light of my lamp, but the sound of his voice roused in me old remembrances. It was Valetti, one of those few friends whose acquaintance I made in the city of Paris when I was studying there. He said that he had come to Florence accidentally, where his father, who was a distinguished man, lived. He had heard about my affair, and had come to see me once more, and to hear from my own lips how I could have committed such a crime. I related to him the whole affair. He seemed much surprised at it, and adjured me, as my only friend, to tell him all, in order not to leave the world with a lie behind me. I confirmed my assertions with an oath that I had spoken the truth, and that I was not guilty of anything, except that the glitter of the gold had dazzled me, and that I had not perceived the improbability of the story of the stranger. "Did you not know Bianca?" he asked me. I assured him that I had never seen her. Valetti now related to me that a profound mystery rested on the affair, that the Governor had very much accelerated my condemnation, and now a report was spread that I had known Bianca for a long time, and had murdered her out of revenge



for her marriage with some one else. I told him that all this coincided exactly with the "red-cloak," but that I was unable to prove his participation in the affair. Valetti embraced me weeping, and promised me to do all, at least to save my life.

I had little hope, though I knew that Valetti was a clever man, well versed in the law, and that he would do all in his power to save my life. For two long days I was in uncertainty; at last Valetti appeared. "I bring consolation, though painful. You will live and be free with the loss of one hand." Affected, I thanked my friend for saving my life. He told me that the Governor had been inexorable in having the affair investigated a second time, but that he at last, in order not to appear unjust, had agreed, that if a similar case could be found in the law books of the history of Florence, my punishment should be the same as the one recorded in these books. He and his father had searched in the old books day and night, and at last found a case quite similar to mine. The sentence was: That his left hand be cut off, his property confiscated, and he himself banished for ever. This was my punishment also, and he asked me to prepare for the painful hour which awaited me. I will not describe to you that terrible hour, when I laid my hand upon the block in the public market-place and my own blood shot over me in broad streams.

Valetti took me to his house until I had recovered; he then most generously supplied me with money for travelling, for all I had acquired with so much difficulty had fallen a prey to the law. I left Florence for Sicily and embarked on the first ship that I found for Constantinople.

My hope was fixed upon the sum which I had entrusted to my friend. I also requested to be allowed to live with him. But how great was my astonishment on being asked why I did not wish to live in my own house. He told me that some unknown man had bought a house in the Greek Quarter in my name, and this very man had also told the neighbors of my early arrival. I immediately proceeded thither accompanied by my friend, and was received by all my old acquaintances joyfully. An old merchant gave me a letter, which the man who had bought the house for me had left behind. I read as follows: "Zaleukos! Two hands are prepared to work incessantly, in order that you may not feel the loss of one of yours. The house which you see and all its contents are yours, and every year you will receive enough to be counted amongst the rich of your people. Forgive him who is unhappier than yourself!" I could guess who had written it, and in answer to my question, the merchant told me it had been a man, whom he took for a Frank, and who had worn a scarlet cloak. I knew enough to understand that the stranger was, after all, not entirely devoid of noble intentions. In my new house I found everything arranged in the best style, also a vaulted room stored with goods, more splendid than I had ever had. Ten years have passed since. I still continue my commercial travels, more from old custom than necessity, yet I have never again seen that country where I became so unfortunate. Every year since, I have received a thousand gold-pieces; and although I rejoice to know that unfortunate man to be noble, yet he cannot relieve me of the sorrow of my soul, for the terrible picture of the murdered Bianca is continually on my mind.

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