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THE COUNT OF NIDECK

"AND THE COUNT WAS STANDING UPRIGHT ON THE WINDOW-SILL."

The Count of Nideck

Adapted FROM The French

OF

Erckmann: Chartrian

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ILLUSTRATED

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CHAPTER I.

THE SUMMONS TO THE CASTLE.

Towards Christmas time, in the year 1780, as I lay soundly sleeping in my room at the Swan Tavern, in Tübingen, old Gideon Sperver burst suddenly into my room, crying, "Gaston, my boy, I have come to take you back with me to the Castle! You know Nideck, twenty miles from here,—the estate of my master, the Count of Nideck!" [Pg 10]

My failure to respond was perhaps due to the fact that I had not seen my worthy foster-father for twenty years, that in this time he had grown a full beard, and that now, in my half-aroused condition, he appeared before me thus, with a huge fur cap pulled down over his ears, and holding an ill-smelling lantern just under my nose.

"In the first place," I replied, "let's take up things in their proper order. Who are you?"

"Who am I?" repeated the good fellow, with such genuine surprise and distress in his tones that I felt a somewhat embarrassing sense of ingratitude. "What! Don't you remember your foster-father, Gideon Sperver, the General's old ranger who saved your life as a child, in the swamp of the Losser?" And his voice became so husky that he stopped and cleared his throat. [Pg 11]

"Ah, my dear Gideon, I know you now, indeed! Give me your hand!" We gripped each other's hands, and Sperver, passing his sleeve across his eyes, continued, "You know Nideck?"

"Of course, by reputation. What are you doing there?"

"I am the Count's steward."

"And how did you happen to come hither?"

"The young Countess Odile sent me to fetch you."

"Very good. When are we to start?"

"At once. It is an urgent matter; the old Count is very ill, and his daughter begged me to lose no time. The horses are waiting for us below."

"But, my dear Gideon, just look at the weather; it has been snowing for three days!" [Pg 12]

"Pshaw! We are not starting on a boar hunt. Put on your fur coat, fasten on your spurs, and we are off! Meanwhile, I will order a bite for you to eat."

He disappeared, and, as I never could refuse the chosen companion of my childhood anything from my youngest days, I hurriedly dressed myself, and lost no time in following him into the dining-room.

"Ah, I knew you would not let me go back alone!" he cried delightedly. "Swallow down this slice of ham and drink a stirrup-cup, for the horses are growing impatient. I have strapped your valise to the saddle."

"What is that for?"

"You will be needed for some days at Nideck; that is indispensable. I will explain everything to you on the way." [Pg 13]

We went down into the inn yard. At that moment two horsemen arrived. They seemed exhausted, and their horses were white with lather.

Sperver, who was a great lover of horses, exclaimed in surprise, "What beautiful animals! They are Wallachians; fine and swift as deer. Come, make haste and throw a blanket over them, my lad," he continued, addressing the hostler, "or they may take cold!"

The travellers, enveloped in white astrakhan greatcoats, passed close to us just as were putting foot in the stirrup. I could only distinguish the long brown moustache of one, and his dark eyes that were singularly bright. They entered the inn. The groom released our bridles and wished us a safe journey. We set off at a gallop. [Pg 14]

Sperver rode a pure Mecklenberg, and I was mounted on a spirited horse of Ardennes; we fairly flew over the snow. In ten minutes we had left the outskirts of Tübingen behind us. It was beginning to clear up. All trace of our road had become obliterated by the considerable fall of snow. Our only companions were the ravens of the Black Forest, spreading their great hollow wings above the drifts, lighting for an instant here and there, and crying in discordant notes, "Misery! Misery! Misery!" Gideon, buried in his coat of wild-cat skin and fur cap, galloped on ahead. Suddenly he turned in the saddle and called, "Hey, Gaston! This is what they call a fine winter's morning." [Pg 15]

"So it is; but a bit severe."

"I like the clear cold weather; it makes you tingle. If old Parson Toby had the courage to start out in such weather, he would never feel his rheumatism again."

I smiled as well as my stiff cheeks would let me. After an hour of this furious pace Sperver slowed down and let me catch up with him. "Gaston," he said in a serious tone, "you ought to know the circumstances of the master's illness."

"I was just thinking of that."

"The more so, as a great number of doctors have already visited the Count."

"Indeed."

"Yes; they have come from Paris, Berlin, and even Switzerland, and have made a most careful study of their patient and employed all their skill, but to no purpose." [Pg 16]

As no answer seemed called for, I remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

"The Count's disease is a terrible affliction somewhat akin to madness. It returns every year on the same day and at the same hour; his eyes grow red as fire, he shudders from head to foot, and he mutters incoherently."

"The man has undoubtedly become unbalanced through trouble and adversity."

"No! Not so! He possesses power and wealth and untold honors,—everything, in short, that other people most desire; but the most singular part of it is that he fancies if his daughter would only consent to marry, it would effect his cure; and she as strangely refuses even to entertain the idea, maintaining that she has consecrated her life to God. The Count cannot bear to think that the ancient race of Nideck must perish with her." [Pg 17]

"How did his illness first declare itself?"

"Suddenly, twelve years ago."

As he spoke my companion seemed to be trying to recall something. "One evening," he began, after a moment, "I was alone with the Count in the armory of the Castle. It was about Christmas time. We had been hunting wild boar all day in the gorges of the Rhethal, and had returned at nightfall bringing with us two poor hounds ripped open the length of their bellies. It was just such weather as this, cold and snowy. The Count was striding up and down the room, his head upon his breast and his hands clasped behind his back, like a man who is deep in thought. From time to time he paused, and looked at the high windows that were fast becoming veiled in snow, while I sat in the chimney-corner warming myself, thinking of my dogs, and silently cursing all [Pg 18]

the wild boar of the Black Forest. For fully two hours everybody in the Castle had been asleep, and there was no sound to break the silence, save the noise of the Count's heavy spurred boots on the flagstones. I distinctly recall how a raven, doubtless borne along by a gust of wind, came flapping against the panes with a discordant cry, and how the sheets of snow fell from the windows. The casements on that side of the house were suddenly changed from white to black." [Pg 19]

"Have these details any bearing on your master's illness?"

"Let me finish. You shall see for yourself. At the raven's cry, the Count suddenly halted; his eyes became fixed, his cheeks ashy pale, and he bent his head forward like a hunter who hears the game approaching. I went on warming myself, thinking meanwhile, 'Won't he go to bed soon?' For, to tell the truth, I was dropping with fatigue. I can see it all, Gaston; I am sitting there now! Scarcely had the raven uttered its harsh croak above the abyss, when the old clock struck eleven. At the same moment the Count turned on his heel; he listened; his lips moved; I saw him totter like a drunken man. He stretched out his hands, his teeth tightly clenched, and his eyeballs [Pg 20] shining like fire. 'My lord,' I cried, 'what is the matter?' But he burst into mad laughter, stumbled, and fell upon the floor, face downwards. I called for help immediately; the servants hurried to the room. Sebalt and I raised the Count and moved him to the bed near the window; but just as I was about to cut my master's cravat with my hunting-knife,—for I believed it was a stroke of apoplexy,—the Countess Odile entered, and threw herself upon the body of her father, uttering such piteous cries that I tremble yet when I think of it. From that hour, Gaston, a pall has hung over the Castle, and Heaven only knows when it will be lifted. Every year, at the same day and hour, [Pg 21] the Count is seized with these strange convulsions. The attacks last from a week to a fortnight, during which he howls and cries in a most terrifying manner. Then he slowly recovers. He is pale and weak, and moves about steadying himself on the chairs of his chamber, and turning fearfully to look, at the slightest sound, seemingly afraid of his own shadow. The young Countess, the sweetest creature in the world, never leaves him; but he cannot bear the sight of her at these times. 'Go! Go!' he cries, stretching out his arms before him. 'Leave me! Haven't I suffering enough as it is, without your hated presence?' It is abominable to hear him, and I, who am always at his side in the chase, and would readily risk my life to serve him,—I could throttle him at these [Pg 22] moments, when I witness his monstrous treatment of his own daughter!"

Sperver, whose swarthy face had assumed a gloomy look, set spurs to his horse, and we continued at a gallop. I had become thoughtful. The cure of such a malady seemed to me exceedingly doubtful, if not indeed impossible. It was evidently some moral disease. In order successfully to combat it, it would be necessary to trace it back to its origin, and this origin was doubtless lost in the vagueness of the past. These reflections tended to increase my apprehension. The old steward's story, far from inspiring me with confidence, had depressed me,—a doubtful state of affairs to insure success.

It was about three o'clock when we descried the ancient Castle of Nideck on the furthest horizon. [Pg 23] In spite of the vast intervening distance, we could distinguish the high turrets suspended like baskets from the angles of the edifice. It was as yet but a mere outline, hardly distinguishable from the blue sky; almost imperceptibly the red granite peaks of the Vosges appeared. At that moment Sperver slowed up and cried, "Gaston, we must get there before night shuts in. Forward!"

But it was in vain that he plunged his spurs into his horse. The animal remained motionless, with [Pg 24] his fore legs planted firmly before him, his mane bristling up with fear, and emitting two streams of bluish vapor from his nostrils.

"POINTING TO A DARK OBJECT CROUCHING IN THE SNOW."

"What does this mean?" cried Gideon, astonished. "Do you see anything, Gaston? Can there—" He [Pg 25] did not finish his sentence; pointing to a dark object crouching in the snow at a distance of some fifty paces on the hillside, he exclaimed, in a tone of such distress that I was a good deal startled, "The Black Plague!" Following with my glance the direction of his extended arm, I was astonished to perceive an aged woman, her legs bent up between her clasped arms, and so ragged that her [Pg 26] red elbows protruded from the sleeves of her dress, seated in the snow. A few locks of gray hair

fell in disorder about her thin, red, vulture-like neck. Singularly enough, a bundle of some sort rested on her knees, and her haggard eyes wandered over the snowy plain. Sperver had gone far to the right and kept as far as possible out of the old creature's way. I had some trouble in overtaking him. [Pg 27]

"What the deuce is the meaning of all this? Are you joking?" I cried.

"Joking! God forbid that I should jest about such matters. I am not superstitious, but this meeting with the old witch frightens me." Then, turning his head and seeing that the old creature had not stirred, and that her eyes were still fixed on the plain before her, he seemed somewhat reassured.

"Gaston," he said solemnly, "you are a man of learning, and are acquainted with many subjects of which I know nothing, but believe me, a man is wrong to laugh at things he cannot understand. It is not without reason that I call this woman the Black Plague. Throughout the Black Forest she is known by that name, but here at Nideck she has won a special right to it." [Pg 28]

My companion rode on for a few minutes without speaking. "Come, Sperver, explain yourself more clearly! I confess I don't understand you in the least."

"The hag that you saw down there is the cause of all our misfortunes. It is she who is slowly killing the Count."

"How is that possible? How can she exercise such an influence?"

"I cannot tell you. But one thing is certain: on the first day of the Count's attack, at the very moment even, you have only to climb up to the signal-tower and you will see the Black Plague crouching like a dark speck in the long stretch of snow between the Tübingen Forest and the Castle of Nideck. Every day she comes a little nearer, and at her approach, the Count's attacks grow worse; sometimes when the trembling fits come upon him, he says to me, 'Gideon, she is coming.' I hold his arms and try to quiet him, but he keeps muttering with staring eyes, 'She is coming! Oh, oh! She is coming!' Then I climb the tower and survey the landscape. You know I have a keen eye, Gideon. At last, amid the distant mists, between sky and earth, I distinguish a black speck. The next morning the speck has grown larger; the Count starts up in his bed with chattering teeth. On the second day we can see the old creature distinctly, almost within rifle-shot on the plain; and then it is that the Count's jaws become set like a vice, his eyes roll in his head, and he utters terrible cries. Ah, the cursed witch! A score of times I have brought my carbine to bear on her, but the poor Count has prevented me from drawing the trigger, crying, 'No, Sperver; shed no blood!' Poor man! He is sparing the creature who is killing him by inches; he is nothing but skin and bones." [Pg 29] [Pg 30]

My good friend Gideon was too much taken up with the vision of the hag to be brought back to calm reason. Moreover, who can define the exact limits of the possible? Do we not each day see the realm of reality extend itself more widely? These hidden influences, these unseen bonds, this world of magnetism that some proclaim with all the ardor of the fanatic, and others deny with scorn and ridicule,—who can say that all these forces will not some day revolutionize our universe? It is easy to arrogate to yourself a claim to superior knowledge in the face of such general ignorance. I confined myself, therefore, to begging Sperver to moderate his anger, and beyond all things not to fire upon the Black Plague, warning him that it would very probably bring grave misfortune upon himself. [Pg 31]

"Bah! I will risk all that!" he exclaimed; "the worst they could do would be to hang me."

"But that would be a good deal for an honest man to suffer."

"As well die one way as another. In this case, you are suffocated, that's all. I would as lief die that way as to receive a blow on my head, or a stroke of apoplexy, or give up smoking, drinking, and a good digestion." [Pg 32]

"My dear Gideon, that sounds odd, coming from a graybeard."

"Graybeard or not, that is the way I look at it. I always keep a bullet in my rifle at the service of the witch; from time to time, I renew the priming, and if ever the occasion offers—" He finished his sentence by an expressive gesture.

"You are wrong, Sperver! I am of the same opinion as the Count: 'no bloodshed.' Reconsider, and discharge your piece against the first wild boar you happen upon."

These words seemed to have some effect upon the old huntsman; he dropped his chin on his breast, and his face assumed a thoughtful expression. [Pg 33]

By this time, we were climbing the wooded slopes which separate the squalid hamlet of Tiefenbach from the Castle of Nideck. Night had overtaken us, and as it often happens after a clear, cold day in winter, the snow was beginning to fall again, and large flakes fell and melted on our horses' manes. The animals whinnied and increased their pace, cheered doubtless by the prospect of a warm shelter. Every now and then, Sperver turned and looked behind him with evident anxiety, and I was not free from a certain indefinable apprehension as I reflected upon the strange account of his master's malady which the steward had given me. Besides, man's spirit harmonizes itself with its surroundings, and, for my part, I know of nothing more melancholy than a forest covered with snow and hoar frost, and stirred by a moaning wind; the trees have a [Pg 34]

sombre, icy look that chills you to the heart.

As we climbed the slope, the oak-trees became fewer, and the birches, straight and white as marble columns, stretched one beyond another, far out to the horizon line intersecting the dark arches of the larch-trees. Suddenly, as we emerged from a thicket, the ancient fortress reared up before us, its dark extent sprinkled with points of light. Sperver had pulled up before a funnel-shaped gateway, cut deep in the rock between two towers, and barred by an iron grating. [Pg 35]

"Here we are!" he cried, leaning over the horse's head and seizing the deer's-foot bell-handle. The clear tinkle of a bell sounded in the interior.

After a few minutes of waiting, a lantern appeared at the end of the archway, dispersing the gloom, and showing us within its circle of light a little dwarf with a yellow beard and broad shoulders, enveloped in furs from head to foot. He came slowly towards us and pressed his great flat face against the grating, straining his eyes to make us out in the darkness.

"Is that you, Sperver?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"Yes. Open the door, Knapwurst!" cried the huntsman. "Don't you know how devilish cold it is?"

"Ah, I know you now," replied the little fellow; "it is you indeed! You always speak as though you would swallow people whole." [Pg 36]

The door opened, and the gnome, raising his lantern towards me with an odd grimace, greeted me with, "Welcome, Monsieur Doctor," but in a tone as much as to say, "Here is another one who will go the way of the rest." Then he quietly closed the door, while we dismounted, and this done, he came to take our horses by the bridle. [Pg 37]

CHAPTER II.

I MEET THE COUNTESS.

Following Sperver, who climbed the staircase at a rapid pace, I was able to convince myself that the Castle of Nideck merited its reputation. It was a true stronghold, cut out of the rock; a relic of feudal times. Its high, deep archways reëchoed the sound of our steps, and the wind blowing through the loopholes caused the flame of the torches which were fastened at intervals along the wall to flare and flicker and send our giant shadows dancing along the corridor. Sperver knew every nook and cranny of this vast place; he turned many times to right and left, and I followed him, out of breath. At last he stopped on a large landing, and said to me: [Pg 38]

"I will leave you with the people of the Castle for a moment, Gaston, while I go to inform the young Countess Odile of your arrival."

"Very good; do whatever you think suitable."

"You will find among the domestics, our majordomo, Tobias Offenloch, an old soldier of the regiment of Nideck. In former days he made a campaign in Germany under the Count."

"A good fellow, no doubt."

"You will also see his wife, a Frenchwoman, named Marie Lagoutte, who pretends to come of good family."

"And why not?" [Pg 39]

"To be sure; only, between ourselves, she was nothing but a canteen-woman of Soubise's army. One day she brought us in Tobias Offenloch on her cart, minus one leg, and the poor fellow married her out of gratitude; you understand."

"Precisely; but open the door,—I am freezing!" I tried to push past him, but Sperver, obstinate, like all good Germans, was bound to enlighten me as to the people into whose presence I was about to enter, and seizing me by the frogs of my greatcoat, he continued:

"Then there is Sebalt Kraft, the master of the hounds, a sad sort of chap, but without an equal in sounding the horn; Karl Trumpf, the butler; Christian Becker, and all our people, if they haven't all gone to bed." [Pg 40]

Thereupon Sperver pushed open the door, and I stood surprised on the threshold of a high, dark hall, the former guardroom of Nideck. I took in at a glance the three windows at the further end of the room, that dominated the precipice; on the right a sort of sideboard of old oak, browned by age, and on it a small cask, glasses, and bottles; on the left a Gothic chimney with a broad mantel-shelf empurpled by the blazing fire underneath, and ornamented in front and on the sides by carvings representing the various scenes of a boar hunt in the Middle Ages; and finally, in the centre of the room, a long table upon which stood a huge lamp, its light reflected by a dozen mugs with pewter lids.

All this I saw at a glance, but it was the people that interested me most. I recognized at once the majordomo with his wooden leg; a small, square, thick-set man, with a ruddy face, and prominent [Pg 41]

waistband, and a nose of marvellous brilliancy. He wore an enormous hemp-colored wig, with a long pigtail, a coat of apple-green plush with steel buttons as large as a five-franc piece, velvet breeches, blue silk stockings, and shoes with silver buckles. He was about to turn the spigot of the cask; an air of inexpressible satisfaction beamed upon his rubicund face, and his eyes, starting slightly from his head, glowed in profile like a pair of watch glasses. His wife, the worthy Marie Lagoutte, dressed in a gown of woolen stuff with a large flowered pattern, and her thin face the color of a withered apple, was playing cards with two servants, all three seated in straight-backed armchairs. Some small split pegs pinched the olfactory organ of the old woman and that of another player, while the third was winking slyly and seemed to enjoy seeing his opponents subjugated beneath this new variety of Caudine Forks. [Pg 42]

"How many cards?" he was asking them.

"Two," replied the old woman.

"And you, Christian?"

"Two."

"Ah, ha! I've got you! Cut the king; now the ace. Ha, ha, ha! Another peg, mother; this will teach you once more to boast to us of your French games!"

"Master Christian, you don't treat the fair sex with due respect." [Pg 43]

"When we play cards, we respect nobody."

"But you see, I have no room for any more."

"Pshaw! with a nose like yours, there's always room enough."

At this moment Sperver cried, "Here I am, comrades!"

"Ha, Gideon! back so soon?"

Marie Lagoutte made haste to shake off her numerous pegs with a motion of her head; the big majordomo emptied his glass, and everybody turned to look at us.

"Is the Count better?"

"Hum!" exclaimed the majordomo, drawing down his under-lip.

"Is his condition unchanged?"

"Just about," answered Marie Lagoutte, who never took her eyes off me. Sperver noticed this. [Pg 44]

"Let me present to you my foster-son, Monsieur de la Roche, from Tübingen," he said proudly. "Things will change now in the Castle, Master Tobie; now that Gaston has come, this cursed malady will be put to flight. If we could only have found him out sooner! However, better late than never."

Marie Lagoutte was still watching me, and the examination seemed to satisfy her, for, turning to the majordomo, "Come, come, Monsieur Offenloch! Stir yourself," she said; "offer monsieur the doctor a chair! You sit there with your mouth open like a great carp!"

With these words, the good woman sprang up as though moved by a spring, and came to help me off with my greatcoat. [Pg 45]

"Permit me, monsieur."

"You are very good, my dear woman."

"Hand it to me, monsieur. Such weather! Ah, monsieur, what a country this is!"

"So our master is neither better nor worse," continued Sperver, shaking the snow from his cap. "We are here in time. Ho! Kasper! Kasper!"

A little man with a drooping shoulder, indicating a partial paralysis of his frame, and a face liberally sprinkled with freckles, came out of the chimney-corner.

"Here I am."

"Good! You must prepare for the doctor the chamber at the end of the long gallery,—Hugh's chamber. You know which one."

"Yes, Sperver. I will see to it at once." [Pg 46]

"One moment! You will take the doctor's valise with you as you go. Knapwurst will give it to you. As to supper—"

"Never fear; I will take care of all that."

"Very good."

The little man went out, and Gideon, after throwing off his cape, left us to go and inform the young Countess of my arrival. I was somewhat embarrassed by the attentions of Marie Lagoutte.

"Come, up with you, Sebalt!" she said to the master of the hounds; "you ought to be sufficiently roasted by this time, sprawling there since morning. Sit down by the fire, Monsieur Doctor; your feet must be cold. Stretch out your legs; that's the way." Then, after a minute: "You have come just in time; our master had his second attack yesterday, and it was a terrible one; hey, Master Offenloch?" [Pg 47]

"Terrible is just the word," replied the majordomo gravely.

"Nor is it to be wondered at, when a man takes no nourishment; and he eats nothing, monsieur. Fancy, it is two days since he has taken so much as a bowl of broth."

"Or a glass of wine," added Tobie, crossing his fat hands on his comfortable waistband.

I felt it incumbent upon me to express some surprise, so I shook my head; whereupon the majordomo came over and sat down on my right, saying, "Take my advice, doctor, and prescribe a bottle of Marcobrunner every day."

"And a chicken wing at each meal," added Marie Lagoutte; "the poor man is as thin as a ghost." [Pg 48]

"We have some Marcobrunner sixty years old, and Johannisberg of the year '14; for Villars's fellows didn't drink it all, as Madame Offenloch would have it. You might prescribe now and then a glass of Johannisberg; there is nothing like it to set a man on his feet."

"There was a time," said the master of the hounds in a melancholy tone, "there was a time when our master went on the hunt twice a week, and he was well; now that he has stopped, he is ill."

"That is reasonable enough," observed Marie Lagoutte; "the fresh air gave him an appetite. The doctor should order him three hunts a week to make up for lost time." [Pg 49]

"Two would do," replied the master of the hounds dismally; "two would do. The dogs must have some time to rest. They must be considered as well as we."

A few moments of silence succeeded, during which I could hear the wind rattling the windows and whistling boisterously through the loopholes and along the empty halls. Sebalt had crossed his legs, and with his elbow on his knee supporting his chin, he gazed into the fire with unspeakable gloominess. Marie Lagoutte refreshed herself with a pinch of snuff, and I was reflecting on that strange infirmity that leads us to press our advice on others, whether they desire it or not, when the majordomo rose, and leaning over the back of my chair, said:

"Will you have a glass of wine, doctor?" [Pg 50]

"Thank you, but I never drink before visiting a patient."

"What, not even one small glass?"

"Not even a tiny glass."

He opened his eyes very wide, and looked with astonishment at his wife.

"Monsieur the doctor is right," she said; "I am of his opinion; I prefer to drink with my meals and take a glass of cognac afterwards. In my country, the women drink cognac; it is more genteel than kirschwasser."

Marie Lagoutte had hardly finished this explanation, when Sperver opened the door part way, and motioned me to follow him. I nodded a farewell to the worthy company, and as I stepped into the passage, I heard Tobie's wife saying to him, "He is a nice-looking young man. He would have made a fine soldier!" Sperver looked uneasy; he said nothing. I too was thoughtful. [Pg 51]

A few steps beneath the shadowy arches of the Castle served completely to efface from my mind the grotesque figures of Tobie and Marie Lagoutte,—poor, inoffensive creatures, living like bats under the vulture's powerful wing. Soon Gideon threw open the door of a sumptuous apartment, hung with violet-colored velvet worked in gold. A bronze lamp, resting on a corner of the mantelpiece, and covered with a globe of ground crystal, vaguely lighted up the room. Thick rugs deadened the sound of our footsteps. It seemed like a refuge consecrated to silence and meditation.

On entering, Sperver lifted the heavy draperies that concealed a turret window. I saw him gaze [Pg 52] earnestly into the plain beneath, and I divined his thoughts; he was looking to see if the witch were still there, crouching in the snow,—but he could see nothing, for the night was dark. As I moved forward into the room, I made out, by the pale rays of the lamp, a young woman of girlish figure seated in an armchair, her forehead resting in her hand, and her whole attitude one of patient but despairing sorrow. Her back was slightly turned towards us, and for this reason I could not at first see her face.

But at the rustle of our entrance she rose quickly, and exhibited to my gaze the most beautiful presence I had ever beheld. The tall, stately figure, the ideal formation of the features, the glory [Pg 53] of golden hair that fell about the fair, white neck, the deep, lustrous eyes that bespoke a soul as pure and beautiful as the scenes among which it flourished,—everything about the young mistress of the Castle proclaimed her to be of that noble type which we meet with but once, if at all, in a lifetime. Just what my feelings were at sight of this beautiful young woman I know not, but certain it is that they were of a nature hitherto unknown to me, and I felt a strange sense of harmony and contentment within me as my glance continued to rest upon her.

After a moment the Countess advanced, and said simply, "You are welcome, monsieur;" then, motioning towards the alcove where the Count lay, she added, "There is my father." [Pg 54]

I bowed low, and without reply,—such was my agitation,—I approached the couch of the sick man. Sperver, standing at the head of the bed, held the lamp in his raised hand, and the light, softened by the crystal globe, fell palely upon the face of the Count. Odile remained near me, waiting anxiously for my first word.

At the first glance I was struck with the strange physiognomy of the Lord of Nideck, and in contrast to the admiration that his daughter had inspired within me, my first thought was, "He is an old wolf!" And in truth, his head bristling with gray hair and swelling behind the ears; his long, pointed face and receding forehead; his narrow eyes and shaggy eyebrows that met in a point over the bridge of his nose, imperfectly shading the dull, cold eye beneath; his short, stiff beard, [Pg 55] spreading unevenly over his bony jaws,—in short, everything about the man made me shudder, and brought involuntarily to my mind the oft-alleged affinities between man and the brute creation.

I mastered my repugnance, and raised the arm of the sick man. It was wasted and tremulous, the hand small and wiry. The pulse was rapid, fluttering and feverish, indicating intense nervous excitement. What was I to do? I considered. On one side stood the young Countess, anxiously awaiting an expression of my opinion; on the other, Sperver, trying to read my thoughts and following attentively my slightest movement. A painful restraint was thus imposed upon me. [Pg 56]

However, I saw that no decided step could be undertaken as yet. I dropped the arm, and listened to the breathing. From time to time, something like a sob escaped the sick man's breast; then the respiration became normal again; then faster, and finally, labored. Some sort of nightmare oppressed him. But the cause!—this I must determine first, and I must confess it seemed hopeless enough. I turned round, sorely perplexed.

"Is there any hope, monsieur?" asked the young woman.

"Yesterday's crisis is drawing to a close, mademoiselle. We must seek to ward off the next attack."

"Is that a possible thing?"

I was about to reply in some scientific generalities, not daring to commit myself, when the distant [Pg 57] sound of the Castle bell fell upon our ears.

"Strangers," said Sperver.

There was a moment of silence.

"Go and see who it is," said Odile, whose brow was shadowed with anxiety. "How can we be hospitable at such times? It is impossible."

Just then the door opened, and a yellow head and rosy cheeks appeared in the shadow, whispering, "The Baron Zimmer, accompanied by his servant, asks for shelter in the Castle. He has lost his way in the mountains."

"Very well, Gretchen," replied the Countess quietly; "go and tell Offenloch to attend to the wants of the strangers. Tell him to inform the Baron Zimmer that the Count is very ill, and that this alone prevents him from doing the honors of the house in person. Wake up our people, and see [Pg 58] that he is properly waited on and that everything is suitably done."

It would be difficult to describe the well-born simplicity with which the young mistress of the Castle gave her orders, and I reflected that if an air of nobility seems inherent in some families, it is certainly because the discharge of hospitable and charitable duties tends to elevate the character and ennoble the soul.

All this passed through my mind while I was admiring the gentle glance, the distinguished carriage, and the exquisitely cut features of Odile of Nideck,—that purity of outline only to be met with in the realms of aristocracy,—and I tried in vain to recall anything comparable to her in my [Pg 59] recollection.

"Make haste, Gretchen! Don't keep the travellers waiting," said the young Countess.

"Yes, madame."

The servant departed, and I stood for a few moments unable to dispel the charm of my meditations. Odile turned and addressed me.

"You see, monsieur," she said with a sad smile, "we are not allowed to indulge our grief; we must ever divide ourselves between our feelings and the claims that others have upon us."

"That is too true, mademoiselle," I replied; "souls of the higher sort seem purposed to serve as a guide and promise to us weaker ones: the traveller who has lost his path, the sick man, and the [Pg 60] starving pauper,—each has a claim upon them, for God has created them like the stars above us, for the happiness of all."

Odile lowered her deep-fringed eyelids, while Sperver pressed my hand.

After a moment, the Countess continued:

"Ah, monsieur, if you could only save my father!"

"As I have had the pleasure of telling you before, mademoiselle, yesterday's crisis is past; we must now endeavor to prevent its recurrence."

"Do you believe that this can be done?"

"With God's help, mademoiselle, it is not impossible. I must give the matter the most careful thought."

Odile, much agitated, moved with me to the door, and as I bowed myself out of the chamber, I [Pg 61] fancied that I detected in her lovely face an expression of increased hope. Sperver and I crossed the antechamber, where a few servants were standing awaiting the orders of their mistress. We had just entered the corridor, when Gideon, who led the way, turned abruptly round, and resting his hands on my shoulders, said:

"Gaston, I am a man to be trusted; what is your opinion of the case?"

"There is nothing to be feared to-night."

"I know that; you said as much to the Countess. But to-morrow?"

"To-morrow?"

"Yes. Don't turn your head. I suppose you can't prevent a recurrence of the attack, but, frankly, [Pg 62] do you think he will die of it?"

"He may, but I don't anticipate it."

"Ah," cried the good fellow joyfully; "that means you are sure he won't!"

Thrusting his arm through mine, he pulled me into the gallery. We had hardly set foot in it when the Baron Zimmer and his groom appeared, preceded by Sebalt, who carried a flaming torch in his hand. They were on their way to their chambers, and these two figures, with their cloaks flung over their shoulders, their knee-boots of soft Hungarian leather, their waists tightly buttoned in, their long green tunics ornamented with frogs and twisted fringes of silk and gold, their bearskin caps drawn down over their ears, and their long hunting-knives stuck in their belts, looked strangely picturesque in the white light of the dripping pine torch. [Pg 63]

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sperver, "if I am not greatly mistaken, those are our Tübingen friends. They were close at our heels, you see."

"You are right; they are the same people! I remember the younger one by his slim figure; he has the profile of an eagle, and wears his mustache like the astrologer-general Wallenstein."

They disappeared beneath a side triforium.

Gideon took a torch from the wall, and guided me through a labyrinth of corridors, passageways, and high, low, turret-shaped, and winding entries. I thought he would never have done.

"Here is the hall of the Margraves," he said; "and this is the portrait gallery. There is the chapel, [Pg 64] where no mass has been said since Louis the Bald became a Protestant. Next comes the armory."

These facts possessed but little interest for me. After having reached the end of the gallery, we had to descend a staircase that seemed interminable; at last, thank Heaven! we halted before a low, massive door. Sperver drew an enormous key from his pocket, and handing me the torch, said, "Mind the light; be careful!"

At the same time, he pushed open the door, and the cold outside air rushed into the passageway. The flame leaped back and sent a shower of sparks in all directions. I fancied myself standing on the edge of an abyss, and I recoiled instinctively. [Pg 65]

"Ha, Ha!" laughed the steward, his mouth parted in a broad grin, "any one would think you were afraid, Gaston. Come on! We are now in the little court that leads from the Castle to the old tower."

The good fellow moved on by way of example. The snow lay deep in this courtyard, and the wind swept it with terrific gusts. Had any one seen our flaring torch upon the plain, he would have asked himself, "What are they doing up there in the clouds? Why are they prowling about at this time of night?"

"Perhaps the old witch is looking up at us," I thought, and the idea made me shudder. I drew closer the folds of my cloak, and holding my hat on with the other hand, I ran after Sperver, who [Pg 66] held his light above his head to show me the path, and moved along with rapid strides.

We rushed into the tower, and then into Hugh's Chamber, where a bright fire greeted us with cheerful cracklings. How grateful it was to be sheltered by the thick walls! I had stopped while Sperver closed the door, and contemplating this ancient abode, I cried, "Thank God, we shall have a moment to rest now!"

"And before an excellent table," added Gideon. "Just look at that,—the leg of a kid, two roasted pheasants, a blue-backed pike, his mouth stuffed with parsley; cold meats and hot wines is what I like. I have no fault to find with Kasper; he has carried out my orders to the letter!" [Pg 67]

Gideon spoke truly,—"cold meats and hot wines;" for before the fire stood a generous array of bottles, being submitted to the gentle influence of the heat. The sight of this repast served to whet my already considerable appetite; but Sperver, who understood the art of being comfortable, said to me:

"Don't be in too great a hurry, Gaston! Let's take things easily! We have time enough; the pheasants won't fly away, and as for the pike, I'll warrant he cares no more about swimming. In the first place, having been eight hours in the saddle, your boots must hurt you, so off with them. Sit down there and put your boot between my knees. I've got that one; let's have the other. There you are. Now put your feet in these slippers, take off your cloak, and throw this dressing-gown over you. Now you'll do!" [Pg 68]

Having gone through a similar course of preparation, he cried in a hearty tone:

"Now, Gaston, fall to! You do your share and I'll do mine, and remember well the German proverb: 'If Beelzebub created thirst, surely the Lord made wine to quench it.'" [Pg 69]

CHAPTER III.

MY FIRST NIGHT IN HUGH'S TOWER.

We ate with the ravenous appetite which a ten hours' ride through the snows of the Black Forest would be likely to impart. Sperver attacked, in turn, the kid, the pheasants, and the pike, murmuring, with his mouth full, "Thank God for the woods, the heather, and the ponds." Then, leaning over the back of his chair and seizing the first bottle that came under his hand, he added, "And for the hillsides, green in spring and purple in autumn. Your health, Gaston!"

"Yours, Gideon!" [Pg 70]

The fire crackled, the forks jingled, the bottles gurgled, and the glasses clinked, while outside the wind of the winter night, the blast from the snow-bound mountains, sang its unearthly hymn,—the hymn that it sings when storm-driven, fantastic cloud-shapes rush across the sky and obscure from moment to moment the pale face of the moon.

We continued our grateful meal. Sperver filled the "wieder komm" with old Brumberg wine, whose sparkling froth bordered its generous edges, and, handing it to me, he cried, "Here's to the recovery of Hermann of Nideck, my noble master! Drink to the last drop, Gaston, that your prayer may be heard."

This was done; then, refilling the bowl, he drained it in his turn. [Pg 71]

A sense of satisfaction took possession of us. We felt at peace with all the world. I sprawled out in my chair with my head thrown back and my arms hanging down, and began to study my apartment. It was a low, arched chamber cut out of the live rock, shaped like an oval, and measuring in the highest part not more than twelve feet. At the further end I perceived a sort of alcove, and in it a bed resting on the floor, and covered, as nearly as I could make out, with a bearskin robe. Still further back was another and smaller niche, with a statue of the Virgin cut out of the same piece of granite and crowned with a bunch of withered grass.

"You are studying your chamber," said Sperver; "it is not as large nor as luxurious as the rooms of the Castle. We are now in Hugh's Tower, and it is as old as the mountain itself. It dates back to the time of Charlemagne. In those days the people didn't understand the art of building lofty, spacious dwellings; they cut right into the solid rock." [Pg 72]

"That served the purpose as well; but it is an odd corner that you have stuck me in, Gideon."

"Don't be deceived on that point, Gaston; it is the place of honor. Whenever the Count's particular friends come to visit him, they are put in here. Hugh's Tower is the most honorable accommodation of all."

"By the way, who was this Hugh?"

"Why, Hugh the Wolf!"

"What!" I exclaimed in astonishment. [Pg 73]

"Certainly; the founder of the family of Nideck; a rough customer, they say. He came and settled down here with a score of horsemen and archers. They scaled the highest rock on the mountain,—you will see it to-morrow,—and built this tower. 'We are the masters,' they declared, 'and woe be to those who try to pass without paying toll. We will fall on them like wolves, tear the clothes from their backs, and the hides, too, if they are obstinate. From here we can command the landscape, the passes of the Rhethal, the Steinbach, and the Roche Plate, and the entire line of the Black Forest. Let the merchants beware.' And the bold fellows carried out their threats under the leadership of Hugh the Wolf. Knapwurst told me all about it when we were sitting up the other night." [Pg 74]

"Knapwurst?"

"You know; the little dwarf who opened the gate to us; a droll chap, Gaston, who is always to be found in the library bent over a book."

"So you have a scholar at Nideck."

"Yes, the rascal! Instead of staying in his lodge, where he belongs, he spends the whole blessed day shaking the dust from old family parchments. He moves about among the shelves like a cat, and he knows our history better than we do ourselves. He would like nothing better than to tell you his stories; he calls them chronicles. Ha, ha, ha!"

Hereupon, Sperver, exalted by the old wine, laughed for some moments, without knowing exactly why.

"So that is why you call this the Tower of Hugh the Wolf?" I resumed. [Pg 75]

"Didn't I just tell you so? What are you so surprised at?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes, you are. I see it in your face. What are you thinking of?"

"It isn't so much the name of the tower that surprises me, as that you, an old ranger, who from a baby had never known any home but the fir-trees and crests of the Wald Horn and the gorges of the Rhethal, who would never sleep with a roof over your head in spite of all my father's urging, and who amused yourself roaming the paths of the Black Forest and revelling in the fresh air, the sunlight, and the freedom of a hunter's life, should be found here, after sixteen years, in this red-granite hole. Come, Sperver, light your pipe and tell me how it happened." [Pg 76]

The old ranger drew a short, black pipe from his leather jacket, filled it leisurely, and snatching up a coal from the hearth, placed it on the bowl of his pipe; then, with his head thrown back and his eyes wandering over the ceiling, he replied thoughtfully:

"After I left your father's service twenty years ago, it was long before I could bring my mind to work for any other master, for I loved the General, and you, and your pretty mother, as I could never come to love others, not even the Count and my mistress Odile. So I took to poaching for a term of years, and found a living by any means I could, until one night the Count came upon me in the moonlight. [Pg 77]

"He did not despise Sperver, the old hawk, the true man of the woods; and he said to me, 'Comrade, you have hunted long enough by yourself; now come and hunt with me. You have a good beak and strong claws, and you might as well hunt my game with my permission as without it.'"

Sperver was silent for some minutes; then he continued:

"I was getting old,—and the old falcons and hawks, having long swept the plains, end by settling down in the cleft of a rock to die. So it was with me. I loved the open air, and I love it yet; but now, instead of lying on a high branch at night and being rocked to sleep by the wind, I prefer to come back to my cover, quietly pick a woodcock, and dry my plumage before the fire." [Pg 78]

Sperver was silent for some moments; then he continued:

"I still hunt as before, and afterwards I drink a quiet glass of Rudesheimer with my friends, or—" At this moment a shock made the door tremble.

"It is a gust of wind," I said.

"No; it is something else. Don't you hear a claw scratching on the panel? I think one of the dogs must have got loose. Open, Walden! open, Lieverlé!"

He got up, but he had not gone two steps when a formidable Danish hound leaped into the room and raised his fore-paws on his master's shoulders, licking his cheeks and beard with his long, red tongue, and whining with joy. Sperver put his arm around the dog's neck, and turning to me: [Pg 79]

"Gaston," he said, "what man could love me as this dog does? Look at this head, these eyes, and teeth!"

He drew back the animal's lips and showed me a set of fangs that could have torn a buffalo to pieces. Then pushing him off with difficulty, for the dog redoubled his caresses, he cried, "Down with you, Lieverlé; I know you love me! Who would, if you did not?" He went and closed the door.

I never had seen a dog of such formidable proportions before; he measured nearly four feet in height, with a broad, low forehead and fine coat, a bright eye, long paws, broad across the chest and shoulders and tapering down to the haunches,—a mass of nerves and muscles interwoven,—but he had no scent. If such animals possessed the scent of the terrier, the game would soon be exterminated. [Pg 80]

Sperver had returned to his seat and was passing his hand proudly over Lieverlé's head, while he enumerated the dog's fine points. Lieverlé seemed to understand him.

"Look, Gaston, that dog would strangle a wolf with a snap of his jaws. He is what you might well call perfection in the matter of courage and strength; not yet five, and in his prime. I need not tell you that he is trained to hunt wild boar. Every time we meet them, I fear for Lieverlé; he attacks

them too boldly; he flies at them like an arrow. Beware of the brutes' tusks, Lieverlé, you rascal! It makes me tremble. Down on your back!" cried the huntsman; "down on your back!" [Pg 81]

The dog obeyed, presenting to us his flesh-colored thighs.

"Do you see that long, white line, without any hair on it, which extends from his thigh clear up to his chest? A boar did that. The noble chap did not let go of the brute's ear, in spite of the wound, and we tracked them by the blood. I came up with them first. Seeing my Lieverlé, I cried out, jumped to the ground, and lifting him in my arms, I wrapped him in my mantle and brought him home. I was beside myself with grief. Luckily, the vital parts were not injured, and I sewed up the wound. God! how he howled and suffered; but at the end of the third day he began to lick the place, and a dog who licks a wound is already saved. Ha, Lieverlé! you remember it! And now we [Pg 82] love each other, don't we?"

I was much moved by the affection of the man for the dog, and the animal for his master. Lieverlé watched him and wagged his tail, while a tear stood in Sperver's eye. Soon he began again:

"What strength! Do you see, Gaston, he has broken his cord to come to me,—a cord of six strands? He found my tracks, and that was enough. Here, Lieverlé! Catch!"

He threw him the remains of the kid's leg. The dog went over and stretched himself in front of the fire with the bone between his fore-paws, and he slowly tore it into shreds. Sperver watched him from the corner of his eye with evident satisfaction.

"Hey, Gaston," said the old steward, "if any one should order you to go and take that bone away, [Pg 83] what would you say?"

"That it was a matter which required delicate manipulation."

We laughed heartily, and Sperver, who was stretched out in his red-leather armchair, with his left arm thrown over the back, one leg resting on a stool, and the other on a log that was dripping with sap and singing in the fierce flame, puffed blue rings of smoke to the ceiling with an air of supreme contentment. As for me, I was lazily watching the dog, when suddenly remembering our interrupted conversation, I began:

"Listen, Sperver! You haven't told me everything. Was it not because of the death of your worthy wife, my old nurse Gertrude, that you left the mountains to come here?" [Pg 84]

Gideon looked grave, and a tear dimmed his eye; he straightened up, and knocking the ashes from his pipe upon his thumb nail, he replied:

"Yes, my wife is dead, and that is what drove me from the woods. I could not see the valley of the Roche Creuse without sorrow, and so I have come hither. I hunt but little in the underbrush, and if the pack happen to go in that direction, I leave them to themselves and turn back again, trying to think of other things."

Sperver had become melancholy. His head had fallen on his breast, and he remained silent. I regretted having recalled these sad images to his mind. Then, reflecting once more on the Black [Pg 85] Plague crouching in the snow, I shivered. How singular that a single word had thrown us into a train of dismal recollections! A whole world of retrospection had been invoked by the merest accident.

I know not how long our silence had lasted, when a deep, terrible growl, like the sound of distant thunder, made us tremble. We looked at the dog. He still held his half-eaten bone between his fore-paws, but with raised head, ears pricked up, and shining eyes, he was listening,—listening in the dead silence, and a tremor of rage ran along his back.

Sperver and I looked at each other anxiously; not a sound, not a murmur, for the wind outside had fallen, and we could have heard the least noise; nothing, save the deep, continued growl, [Pg 86] which seemed to come from deep down in the dog's chest. Suddenly the animal sprang up and leaped against the wall, with a short, harsh, ominous bark that made the arches resound as if thunder were rolling away along the empty passages. Lieverlé, with his head low down, seemed to see through the granite, and his teeth, bared to their roots, glistened like snow. He still growled, pausing now and then for a moment to sniff along the bottom of the wall; then he sprang up again angrily, and seemed trying to tear away the stone with his fore-paws.

We were watching him, unable to understand the cause of his excitement, when a second howl, more fearful than the first, brought us to our feet. [Pg 87]

"Lieverlé," cried Sperver, springing towards him, "for heaven's sake, what ails you? Are you going mad?"

He seized a log, and began to sound the wall, which, however, gave forth only a dull, dense sound. There was apparently no hollow in it, but still the dog maintained the same posture.

"Decidedly, Lieverlé," said the huntsman, "you have had a nightmare. Come, lie down, and don't set our nerves on edge any more."

At the same moment we heard a sound outside. The door opened, and the big, fat face of honest Tobias Offenloch, with his round lantern in one hand and his stick in the other, and his three-cornered hat on one side of his head, appeared smiling and genial in the doorway. [Pg 88]

"Greeting, worthy company!" he exclaimed; "what the devil are you doing here?"

"It was this foolish Lieverlé who made all the racket," said Sperver; "he sprang against the wall and wouldn't be quieted. Can you tell us the reason of it?"

"He probably heard the stumping of my wooden leg as I came up the tower stairs," replied the good-natured fellow with a laugh. Then setting his lantern on the table: "That will teach you, Master Gideon, to tie up your dogs. You have a weakness for dogs,—an absurd weakness. They will end by putting us all out of doors. Only a moment ago, as I was coming along the gallery, I met your Blitz; he snapped at my leg,—see, there are the marks of his teeth. A new leg, too, confound the cur!" [Pg 89]

"Tie up my dogs? What an idea!" replied Sperver. "Dogs that are tied up are good for nothing; it makes them savage. Moreover, Lieverlé was fastened, and he has what was left of the cord around his neck still."

"It is not on my account that I am speaking, for whenever I see them coming, I always raise my stick and put my wooden leg first. It is only for discipline. The dogs ought to be in the kennels, the cats on the gutters, and the people in the Castle, according to my way of thinking."

Tobie sat down as he finished his sentence, and with his elbows resting on the table and his eyes beaming with satisfaction, he said in a confidential tone: [Pg 90]

"You should know, gentlemen, that I am a bachelor this evening."

"How is that?"

"Marie Anne is sitting up with Gertrude in the Count's antechamber."

"Then you are in no hurry."

"Not the least bit."

"How unlucky you should have come so late," observed Sperver; "all the bottles are empty."

The discomfited expression of the good fellow made me feel positively sorry. He would gladly have profited by his widowhood. In spite of my efforts to repress it, however, my mouth parted in a wide yawn.

"We will put it over till another day," he said, getting up; "what is postponed is not lost."

He took up his lantern. [Pg 91]

"Good night, gentlemen."

"Wait a minute," said Gideon; "I see the doctor is sleepy; we will go down together."

"Gladly, Sperver! We will have a word with Trumpf as we pass. He is down-stairs with the others, and Knapwurst is telling them stories."

"Well, good night, Gaston."

"Good night, Sperver. Don't forget to call me if the Count grows worse."

"Never fear. Lieverlé, come here."

They went out, and as they were crossing the platform, I could hear the old Nideck clock striking eleven.

I was completely exhausted with the day's experiences. Soon I threw myself on the bed, and straightway fell into a deep slumber, where all night long I was wandering beside a radiant [Pg 92] creature with a halo of golden hair about her face, amid flower-strewn paths, and the song of birds, and above our heads the fairest of summer skies. [Pg 93]

CHAPTER IV.

KNAPWURST ACQUAINTS ME WITH THE GENEALOGY OF THE NIDECKS.

The dawn was beginning to turn gray the only window of the donjon-tower, when I was awakened in my granite bed by the distant notes of a hunting-horn. I know of no sound more sad and melancholy than the vibrations of its tones, just at morning twilight, when all is still, and no breath, no whisper comes to disturb the perfect quiet of solitude; it is the final note, especially, that, spreading over the immense plain and awaking the far-off echoes of the mountain, stirs us to the heart with its pure, poetic quality. [Pg 94]

Leaning with my elbow on the bearskin, I listened to this plaintive cry, that seemed to be invoking memories of the Feudal Ages. The aspect of my chamber, with its low, ragged arch, and, further on, the little window with its panes set in lead, midway between the alcove and the corridor, the ceiling more wide than high, and deeply hollowed in the wall,—in short, every detail of this ancient den of the Wolf of Nideck served to realize my fancy.

I rose quickly and threw the window wide open. There before me lay a spectacle that no mere language can describe,—the scene that the Alpine eagle surveys each morning, as the purple curtain of night lifts itself from the horizon; range after range of mountains,—motionless billows [Pg 95] that stretch away and become lost in the distant mists of the Vosges and the Jura,—immense forests, lakes, and towering peaks tracing their sharp outlines upon the steel-blue of the snow-clad valleys; beyond this, the infinite! What human skill could attain to the sublimity of such a picture? I stood overwhelmed with wonder and delight. At each glance some new detail was revealed to my eyes; hamlets, farms, villages, seemed to rise from every fold of the landscape, and as I gazed, these objects became more numerous.

I had been standing thus for more than a quarter of an hour, when a hand was laid lightly upon my shoulder; I turned and met the calm face and quiet smile of my friend Gideon, who greeted [Pg 96] me with:

"Good morning, Gaston."

Then he rested his elbows on the window-sill beside me, puffing clouds of smoke from his short pipe. Extending his arm towards the distant mountains, he said at length:

"Look at that, Gaston; you should love it, for you are a son of the Black Forest. Look down there, way down; that is the Roche Creuse. Do you see it? You remember Gertrude? How far off those days seem!"

He stopped and cleared his throat; I was at a loss what to reply. We stood for a long time in a contemplative mood, mute before the grandeur of the scene that rolled away beneath us. From time to time, the old steward, seeing my eyes rest on some point of the horizon, would explain: [Pg 97]

"That is the Wald Horn; this is the Tiefenthal. There you see the cascade of the Steinbach; it has stopped running now, and hangs like an ice cloak over the shoulder of the Harberg,—a cold garment for this season of the year. Down there is the path that leads to Tübingen; a fortnight more and we shall have difficulty in tracing it."

An hour passed thus; I could not tear myself away from the scene.

A few birds of prey, with gracefully hollowed wings, were sailing about the tower; a flock of herons flew above them, escaping their claws by reason of their loftier flight. Not a cloud was visible in the sky; all the snow had fallen to earth. The hunting-horn saluted the mountain for the [Pg 98] last time.

"That is my friend Sebalt mourning down there," said Sperver. "No one is a better judge of horses and dogs than he, and when it comes to sounding the horn, there is not his equal in all Germany. Just hear how mellow those notes are, Gaston. Poor Sebalt! he is pining away since our master became ill; he cannot hunt as he used to. His only consolation is to climb the Altenberg every morning just at daybreak, and play the Count's favorite airs. He thinks that may cure him."

Sperver, with the tact of a man who himself loves beautiful things, had not interrupted my contemplation; but when, dazzled by the growing light, I turned back into the chamber, he said: [Pg 99]

"Gaston, things look more encouraging; the Count has had no return of the convulsions."

These words brought me back to a more practical world.

"Ah, I am glad to hear it."

"And it is your doing, too."

"Mine? I haven't even prescribed anything yet."

"What of that? You are here."

"You're joking, Gideon; what could my mere presence accomplish?"

"You bring him good luck."

I looked at him closely; he was in earnest.

"Yes," he repeated seriously; "you are a bringer of good luck. In past years, our master has had a second attack the day after the first, and then a third, and fourth; but you have prevented this [Pg 100] and arrested the course of the malady. That is clear enough."

"Not to my mind, Sperver. On the contrary, I find it exceedingly obscure."

"We are never too old to learn," continued the worthy fellow. "There are forerunners of good fortune and harbingers of ill. Take that rascal Knapwurst, for example; he is a sure sign of bad luck. If ever I happen to run across him as I am going out hunting, I am sure to meet with some accident; my gun misses fire, I sprain my ankle, or a dog gets ripped open. Knowing this, I always take care to set off just at daybreak, before the scamp, who sleeps like a dormouse, has got his eyes open; or else I steal through the postern gate." [Pg 101]

"A wise precaution; but your ideas seem odd to me, Gideon."

"But you, on the other hand," he continued without noticing my interruption, "are an open-hearted, honest lad. Heaven has bestowed many blessings upon you; just one glance at your

good-natured face, your frank gaze, and your kindly smile, is enough to make any one happy. And you bring good luck; that is certain. Do you want a proof of what I say?"

"Why, certainly. I am not sorry to discover that I possess so many hitherto unknown virtues."

"Well," said he, seizing my wrist, "look down there!"

He pointed to a hillock a couple of gunshots distant from the Castle.

"Do you see that rock half buried in the snow, with a bush to the left of it?" [Pg 102]

"Distinctly."

"And you see nothing near it?"

"No."

"Well, that is easily accounted for; you have driven the Black Plague away. Every year, on the second day of the Count's illness, she was to be seen there, with her arms clasped around her skinny knees. At night, she lighted a fire, warmed herself, and cooked the roots of trees. She was a curse to every living thing. The first thing I did this morning was to climb up to the signal-tower and look around me. The old hag was nowhere to be seen. In vain did I shade my eyes with my hand and gaze to right and left, up and down, across the plain and over the mountain,—not a sign [Pg 103] of her anywhere. She has scented you, sure enough!"

Wringing my hand in his enthusiasm, the good fellow cried excitedly, "Oh, Gaston, Gaston! How lucky it was that I brought you here! How angry the old hag will be!"

I must confess to a feeling of embarrassment at discovering so much merit in myself, which had hitherto escaped my observation.

"So the Count has passed a comfortable night, Sperver?" I continued.

"Very comfortable," he replied.

"That is welcome news. Let's go down-stairs."

We once more crossed the little courtyard, and I was able to obtain a better view of our means of egress, whose ramparts attained to a prodigious height,—continuing along the edge of the rock to [Pg 104] the very bottom of the valley. It was a flight of precipices, so to speak, shelving one below another into the dizzy depths beneath. On looking down, I became giddy, and recoiling to the middle of the landing, I hastened down the passageway which led to the Castle.

Sperver and I had already traversed several broad corridors, when a wide-open door blocked our passage. I glanced in and saw, at the top of a double ladder, the little gnome Knapwurst, whose grotesque physiognomy had struck me the night before. The hall itself attracted my attention by its imposing aspect. It was a storehouse for the archives of Nideck, a high, dark, dusty [Pg 105] apartment, with long Gothic windows reaching from the ceiling to within three feet of the floor.

There were to be found, ranged along the broad shelves by the careful abbots of olden times, not only all the documents, title-deeds, and genealogical trees of the families of Nideck, establishing their rights, alliances, and relations with the most illustrious nobles of Germany, but also the chronicles of the Black Forest, the collected remnants of the old Minnesingers, and the great folios from the presses of Gutenberg and Faust, no less venerable on account of their origin and the enduring solidity of their binding. The deep shadows of the alcoves, draping the cold walls with their grayish gloom, reminded you of the ancient cloisters of the Middle Ages; and in the [Pg 106] midst of it all sat the dwarf at the top of his ladder, with a huge, red-edged volume lying open on his bony knees, his head buried to the ears in a fur cap; gray-eyed, flat-nosed, the corners of his mouth drawn down by long years of thought, with stooping shoulders and wasted limbs; a fitting *famulus*—the rat, as Sperver called him—to this last refuge of the learning of Nideck.

That which gave to the place a unique interest, however, was the line of family portraits that covered one whole side of the ancient library. There they were, knights and ladies, from Hugh the Wolf down to Count Hermann, the present owner; from the crude daubs of barbarous days to the perfect work of the best painters of our own time. My attention was naturally centred upon [Pg 107] this part of the room. Hugh I., with a bald head, seemed watching you from his frame as a wolf glares at the traveller whom a sudden turn in the forest path discloses to view. His gray, blood-shot eyes, bristling beard, and large, hairy ears, gave him an air of singular ferocity.

Next to him, like the lamb next the savage beast, was a young woman, with a gentle, sad expression, her hands clasped on her breast, her long, silken tresses of fair hair parted over the forehead and falling in thick waves about her face, which they encircled with a golden aureole. I was struck with her resemblance to Odile of Nideck. Nothing could have been more delicate and charming than this old painting on wood, a little stiff in its outline, but charmingly simple and [Pg 108] ingenuous.

I had been studying this portrait for some minutes, when another, hanging beside it, drew my attention in its turn. Here, too, was a woman, but of the true Visigothic type, with a broad, low forehead, yellow eyes, and prominent cheek-bones, red hair, and nose like an eagle's beak. "That woman must have been to Hugh's liking," I said to myself, and I began to study the costume, which was in perfect keeping with the energy expressed in the face, for the right hand clasped a sword, and the waist was encircled in a steel corselet.

I know not how to describe the thoughts that succeeded one another in my mind as I gazed upon these three faces. My eye roamed from one to another with singular curiosity, and I found it impossible to terminate my study. Sperver, standing on the threshold of the library, gave a sharp whistle, seemingly to attract Knapwurst's attention, who looked down at him from the top of his ladder without stirring. [Pg 109]

"Is it me you are whistling to like a dog?" said the dwarf.

"Aye, you imp! None else."

"Listen to me, Sperver," replied the gnome with supreme disdain; "you cannot spit so high as my shoe; I defy you!" and he stuck out his foot.

"And if I should come up there?"

"I would squash you flat with this volume."

Gideon laughed, and replied:

"Come, come, Knapwurst! Don't get angry! I don't wish you any harm; on the contrary I have the greatest respect for your learning; but what the devil are you doing at this hour, seated over your lamp? Any one would think you had spent the night here." [Pg 110]

"So I have, reading!"

"Aren't the days long enough for you?"

"No! I am looking up an important question, and I shan't sleep till I have settled it."

"Well, by Jove; what is this interesting question?"

"It is to find out under what circumstances Ludwig of Nideck discovered my ancestor, Otto the Dwarf, in the forests of Thuringia. You should know, Sperver, that my ancestor Otto was only an arm's length high; that is, about two feet and a half. He delighted the world with his wisdom, and figured honorably in the coronation of the Emperor Rodolph. Count Ludwig had him enclosed in a cold roast peacock, served up with all its plumage. During the feast, Otto spread out the peacock's tail, and all the nobles, courtiers, and great ladies were astonished at this ingenious piece of mechanism. At last Otto emerged, sword in hand, and cried in a thundering voice, 'Long live the Emperor, Rodolph of Hapsburg!' which was repeated on all sides with shouts and rejoicings. Bernard Hertzog mentions this circumstance, but fails to inform us as to the family origin of the dwarf, whether he was of noble descent, or of base extraction; the latter hypothesis being highly improbable, as the common herd are rarely possessed of so much wit." [Pg 111] [Pg 112]

I was amazed at the conceit of this little creature, my curiosity, however, leading me to dissemble my feelings; for he alone could furnish me with the facts concerning the two portraits that hung on the right of Hugh the Wolf.

"Monsieur Knapwurst," I said, in a tone of profound respect, "would you have the kindness to enlighten me upon a certain subject?"

Flattered by these words, the little fellow replied:

"Speak, monsieur; if it is a question of family history, I shall be glad to inform you. In other subjects I take but little interest."

"It is precisely that. I should like to learn something about the noble ladies whose pictures hang on the wall yonder." [Pg 113]

"Aha!" cried Knapwurst, his face lighting up; "you mean Elfreda and Huldine, the two wives of Hugh, the founder of Nideck."

Laying down his volume, he descended the ladder to talk more at his ease. His eyes glistened, and an air of gratification at this opportunity of displaying his learning shone out all over him.

Having reached my side, he saluted me with a grave bow. Sperver stood behind us, seemingly well satisfied to see me admiring the dwarf of Nideck. In spite of the ill luck which he averred attached to the presence of the pigmy, he admired and boasted of his great learning. [Pg 114]

"Monsieur," said Knapwurst, pointing with his long, yellow hand towards the portraits, "Hugh of Nideck, the founder of his race, married in 832 Elfreda of Lutzelbourg, who brought to him as dowry the counties of Giromani and Haut Barr, the Castles of Geroldsdeck and Teufelshorn, and others. Hugh had no children by his first wife, who died young in the year of our Lord 837. Thereupon, Hugh, now lord and master of the dowry, refused to yield possession of it, and there followed terrible battles between himself and his brothers-in-law. His second wife, Huldine, whom you see in the steel breastplate, aided him by her wise counsels. She was a woman of indomitable courage, but her origin remains a mystery. One thing is certain, however: she rescued her husband, who had been taken prisoner by Frantz of Lutzelbourg. He was to have been hanged that very day, and the iron bar had already been stretched across the battlements in preparation for the execution, when Huldine, at the head of a band of the Count's vassals whom she had inspired by her brave example, burst into the courtyard by a rear entrance, rescued Hugh, and had Frantz hung in his place. Hugh the Wolf married his second wife in 842, and by her he had three children." [Pg 115] [Pg 116] [Pg 117]

"IN THE PORTRAIT GALLERY."

"So," I resumed meditatively, "the first of these wives was called Elfreda, and the descendants of Nideck are not related to her?"

"No."

"Are you sure of this?" [Pg 118]

"I can show you our genealogical tree. Elfreda had no children; Huldine, the second wife, had three."

"That is very surprising!"

"Why so?"

"I thought I noticed a resemblance."

"Ha, ha! resemblances!" exclaimed the dwarf with a harsh laugh; "wait a moment. Just look at this wooden snuff-box that lies beside the plaster greyhound! It represents my ancestor, Hanswurst. He has a nose like an extinguisher, and a sharp chin, while I have a flat nose and an agreeable mouth; and yet this does not prevent my being his great-great-grandson."

"No, certainly not."

"Well, it is the same with the Nidecks. They may have certain characteristics in common with Elfreda, but [Pg 119] Huldine is the head of the line. Look at this genealogical tree, monsieur. Have I not informed you correctly?"

Then we separated,—Knapwurst and I,—the best of friends. [Pg 120]

CHAPTER V.

I BREAKFAST WITH ODILE.

"Nevertheless," I said to myself, "the resemblance is there! Is it chance? Nonsense! What is chance, anyway, save that for which we fail to grasp the reason? No; there must be some other explanation of it!"

Buried in these reflections, I followed my friend Sperver, who had resumed his walk down the corridor. The portrait of Elfreda, that pure, artless face, blended in my fancy with that of the young Countess. Suddenly Gideon stopped. I looked up; we were standing before the Count's room. [Pg 121]

"Go in, Gaston," he said; "I will see, meanwhile, if breakfast is ready, and be with you again in a minute."

I entered noiselessly, and made out, in the dim light, the broad figure of Becker, the forester, sprawled out leisurely in his armchair beside the bed and drowsing over his vigil.

The Count was sleeping quietly, with every indication that this desirable state of things would continue. Seeing no reason for remaining longer, I directed Becker to let me know at once if the master should wake, and I withdrew to the hall, where I met Sperver returning to get me.

"The Countess is waiting for you in the dining-room. She is overjoyed at the news of her father. Poor woman! It has been a hard strain upon her, for she insists on remaining close beside the [Pg 122] Count, and her strength is not equal to the task."

"So it seemed to me," I replied; and I secretly regretted that I saw no way in which I could properly suggest to the Countess that she should share her watchfulness more with others.

We reached the dining-room. Sperver announced me and departed.

My eyes fell first upon Odile, seated at the head of the table in a high-backed oaken chair. She was dressed in a gown of gray stuff, simply fashioned, with a bodice of white velvet worked in gold. Her superb figure was perfectly set off by the almost severe outlines of the dress.

"It is she," I thought: "Hugh's first wife. There is the noble forehead; there are the long lashes, [Pg 123] the somewhat languid bearing, and the indescribable smile."

And as I gazed, the dream of last night recurred to me in all its charming vividness, and I felt that, far from entering upon her world but a few hours since, I had known her—aye, and loved her, too!—for years.

"Good morning, monsieur!" she said in answer to my salutation, as she rose and rested one hand

on the chair-back. "It seems that your presence here has already worked a change for the better. Our good Sperver tells me that my father's condition is improved."

"I am delighted to be able to assure you that it is so, mademoiselle. We must endeavor to confirm these bettered conditions." [Pg 124]

"I am so thankful!" she exclaimed. "Who knows but it was Providence that brought you here?" and she indicated my seat at the end of the table opposite her.

Bowing to the housekeeper, who sat before the broad fireplace, with her spectacles thrust back on her forehead, plying her busy needles, her lap filled with knitting-work which momentarily grew as she rocked back and forth in time to the ticking of the tall clock, I took the seat which Odile designated, experiencing a sense of rare contentment as I reflected upon my surroundings. Decidedly, my present employment combined pleasure with the exactions of duty.

No further mention of the Count's condition was made during the repast, Odile preferring apparently to confine herself to other subjects. [Pg 125]

"Sperver," she said presently, "has often spoken of you to us with much pride and affection. Your relationship with the old steward is a romantic one, is it not?"

"Rather," I replied. "It began some twenty years ago with his pulling me out of a swamp into which I got myself, through my desire to imitate his custom of roaming the forest."

Then, as Odile smiled and seemed to be waiting for me to continue, I resumed:

"I distinctly remember how, one morning, I escaped the vigilance of my old nurse, Gideon's wife Gertrude, and arming myself with my father's old sabre, I sallied into the forest with a vague [Pg 126] notion of performing some similar exploits to those which Gideon was never tired of telling me. I had not gone far when, finding the forest very dark and lonely, and quite unlike what I had fancied it, I began to repent of my resolution and to wish I was safely at home again. The sabre, too, had grown very heavy, and everything about the undertaking having fallen far short of my anticipation, I turned around and began to retrace my steps. Having only such knowledge of direction as a boy of eight would be likely to have, I soon lost my way, and in attempting to cross the swamp of the Losser by picking my path along the tufts of grass above its surface, I lost my footing and slipped into the mud. Fortunately Sperver happened to be passing in the [Pg 127] neighborhood. He heard my cries, and promptly coming to my aid, he pulled me out and carried me to safer ground. Meanwhile my absence from home had been discovered, and the men servants had been sent in all directions to search for me. My father was so delighted at seeing me again, unharmed, in Sperver's arms, that he rewarded his ranger with a brand-new carbine and a brace of his favorite hounds."

I laughed as I recalled this incident, and the Countess joined me in it, continuing after a little:

"And your old home?"

"It has passed into other hands. On the death of both my parents, which occurred within a few years, I was left entirely without resources, save such as I could create for myself, and it became [Pg 128] necessary to dispose of the estate in order to get the means which I required to pursue my studies."

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to be thus confiding to Odile my intimate affairs, though ordinarily I guarded such matters with jealous care; but I felt, I know not why, that her expression of interest was more a wish to learn the real facts of my condition than merely to evince a civil concern in my interests. Such feelings are intangible; they cannot be explained.

"You are living now in Tübingen?"

"Yes; after six years' study in Germany and France, I have returned to the scenes of earlier times to try what fortune may have in store for me. I feel that I never should be contented anywhere [Pg 129] else; and I am better satisfied to remain here with a modest success than in the cities with, maybe, a more considerable one."

"How well I can understand that feeling," replied the Countess musingly. "Long ago, when we used to visit the court each year, I remember that, in spite of all its gaieties and pleasures, so well calculated to charm young minds, I was always glad when the time came to return to the Castle; and that for a girl of eighteen is unusual, I think."

I was silently musing upon the fair face opposite me, and the charming personality of my noble hostess, which piqued my curiosity and aroused in me a singular desire to learn more of it. The young Countess conducted the affairs of the table with captivating grace, and the ready [Pg 130] Offenloch was ever on the watch for her slightest nod or glance. Truly, I felt myself under a spell no less potent than the companions of Ulysses of old.

Rousing myself at length from these agreeable reflections, I resumed:

"You too, mademoiselle, are fond of the hunt, I suppose? for the Count's devotion to it is proverbial."

"Yes!" she replied, "when it is not a deer or fox that is being hunted. Somehow the wild boar claims less of my sympathy, for it is often a question which comes off the better, the man or the beast."

The truth of this remark it was reserved for me to learn at a later day. [Pg 131]

"As for me, I have never had any experience in the chase, as the years which I might have spent so were passed in foreign cities, but some time I hope to give it a thorough trial."

A pause succeeded, during which Odile prepared the coffee. From time to time I glanced at Marie, whose admiration for my person expressed the evening before seemed in no way to have decreased, judging from the senile simper which invariably appeared on her face when she caught my eye.

"This Castle has an indescribable charm for me," I continued after a little; "it has such a delightfully ancient air, and its old stones seem so full of romance;" and my eyes wandered to the two suits of armor at the further end of the room, which from their shadowy corners nodded at [Pg 132] each other, gaunt and sightless, in the uncertain firelight.

"I am fond of it," replied Odile; "indeed, I feel that I could never be happy anywhere else; but at times it is lonely, nevertheless."

Then I began to reflect upon the singular vow which this charming young creature, so eminently lovable in every trait of character and person, had taken, it seemed almost wantonly and in a spirit of perversity; and yet I was satisfied that no such explanation could be sufficient, for I felt instinctively that no small or trivial thought could gain admittance to Odile's mind.

"Perhaps," I thought, "some day the wanderer will come to implant the magic kiss, and she, like others of her sisters, will be obliged to obey the inexorable laws of the little god." [Pg 133]

So I thought. It seemed to me that one might be happy here, could he continue forever, as I was then, in Odile's companionship, amid gay companies and festivals, hunting-parties and the like, which I felt would become immediately inaugurated, were the Count's recovery to become an established fact. Then my thoughts reverted once more to my patient, and, speculating for the fiftieth time on all that Sperver had told me of his master, I was recalled to a less alluring train of reflections, and I became grave as I realized the burden of duty which rested upon me.

An hour passed, the breakfast was finished. I rose and took leave of the Countess, who inclined her head with a friendly smile. As I stepped into the hallway, I descried Sperver in the distance. [Pg 134]

"The Count has waked, and he wishes to see you," he said, as he reached me.

"He is no worse?" I asked.

"Apparently not; he seems quiet enough."

Still engrossed with the experience of the last hour passed in the dining-room, I moved along with Sperver down the corridor. [Pg 135]

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNT UNSHEATHES HIS CLAWS.

I entered the Count's chamber. What was my surprise to perceive in the half-light of the alcove, the master of Nideck raised upon his elbow and studying me with profound attention. I had so little anticipated such a reception, that I paused in surprise.

"Come here, doctor," he said in a faint but steady voice, reaching out his hand. "My good Sperver has often spoken to me of you, and I have been anxious to make your acquaintance."

"Let us hope, monsieur," I replied, "that it may be continued under more auspicious [Pg 136] circumstances; a little patience, and all will be well!"

"I fear not," he replied; "I feel that the end is drawing near."

"You are mistaken, monsieur."

"No! Nature grants us, as a last favor, a presentiment of our approaching end."

"How often have I seen such presentiments disproved!" I returned, smiling.

He gazed fixedly at me, as sick people are wont to do when they are in doubt as to their true condition. It is a trying moment for the doctor; upon his expression depends the moral strength of the sufferer; if the sick man detect the suspicion of a doubt, all is lost; dissolution begins, the soul prepares to quit the body, and the malady holds full sway. I passed firmly through the ordeal; the [Pg 137] Count seemed reassured; he pressed my hand again, and released it, calmer and more confident.

During the pause which followed, Odile and Marie Lagoutte entered the room. They must have followed close behind us. They seated themselves in the two chairs which occupied the embrasure of the window, and Marie resumed her knitting, while Odile spread open a portfolio on her lap and seemed to be studying it.

Soon the Count's glance wandered from my face to that of his daughter, whom he continued to

regard fixedly for a long time in silence.

This somewhat oppressive quiet continued, broken only by the jarring of the casements, the monotone of the wind, and the sound of the snow as it swirled and whispered against the panes. [Pg 138]

After a half hour of this, the Count suddenly began to speak:

"If my beloved child Odile would but grant my request, if she would only consent to let me hope that one day she would fulfil the desire of my heart, I believe that alone would accomplish my recovery!" I glanced quickly at Odile; she had closed her book, and her eyes were fastened on the floor. I noticed that she had become deathly pale.

"Yes," continued the sick man, "I should return to life and happiness! The prospect of seeing myself surrounded by a new branch of our family, of embracing my grandchildren, and of seeing the perpetuation of our house ensured, would suffice to cure me." [Pg 139]

I felt moved at the mild and gentle pleading of the sufferer. The young woman made no reply. After a minute or two, the Count, who looked entreatingly at her, pursued:

"Odile, you refuse to make your father happy. My God! I only ask for hope; I fix no time! I do not seek to control your choice! We will go to court, and choose from a hundred noble suitors. Who would not be proud to win my daughter's hand? You shall be free to decide for yourself."

He paused. Nothing is more painful to a stranger than these family discussions. There are so many conflicting interests, deep emotions, and sacred feelings involved, that our innate delicacy demands that we hold aloof from such scenes. I was pained, and would gladly have withdrawn, but the circumstances did not permit of it. [Pg 140]

"Father," said Odile, as if to evade further insistence on the sick man's part, "you will recover. Heaven will not take you from us who love you so dearly. If you only knew with what loving fervor I pray for you!"

"That is not answering my question," said the Count drily. "What objection have you to my proposal? Is it not just and natural? Must I be deprived of the consolations accorded the most wretched? Have I made use of force or trickery?"

"No, father!"

"Then why do you refuse me?" [Pg 141]

"My resolution is taken; I have consecrated myself to God."

So much firmness in so frail a being astonished me. She stood there like the sculptured Madonna in Hugh's Tower,—fragile, calm, impassive.

The eyes of the Count glowed with feverish brightness. I endeavored to prevail upon the Countess, as best I could by signs, to give him a grain of hope, that his growing agitation might be calmed; but she did not appear to see me.

"So," he cried in a voice choked with emotion, "you will see your father perish! A single word would save his life,—a word from your lips,—and you will not pronounce it."

"Life is not within the gift of man, but of God alone," she murmured; "a word from me could be of no avail." [Pg 142]

"These are nothing but pious maxims," cried the Count bitterly, "to ease your conscience in refusing to do your duty! Has not God commanded, 'Honor thy father and thy mother'?"

"I do honor you, my father," she replied gently; "but it is my duty not to marry."

I could hear the Count grind his teeth. He lay for a few moments, apparently calm, then he suddenly sprang up.

"Out of my sight!" he screamed; "your presence is hideous to me!"

Then turning to me:

"Doctor," he cried with a savage smile, "have you a poison about you,—a poison that slays with the quickness of a lightning flash? It is only merciful to give it to me! Ah, God! If you knew how I suffer!" [Pg 143]

His features worked convulsively; he became livid. Odile had risen and moved towards the door.

"'STAY!' HE HOWLED, 'I HAVE NOT CURSED YOU YET.'"

"Stay!" he howled; "I have not cursed you yet!"

Up to this point, I had restrained myself, not daring to interfere between the father and his child; but I could endure it no longer.

"Monsieur," I exclaimed; "in the name of your own health, in the name of reason, calm yourself! Your life depends upon it!"

"What matters my life? What matters the future? Oh, if I were only done with it all!"

His excitement increased with every moment. I feared lest, crazed with passion, he might spring [Pg 144] from the bed and destroy his own child. She, still calm, but with cheeks as pale as his, fell on her knees before the threshold. At this moment, I succeeded in getting the Count to swallow a few drops of laudanum. He fell back with a long sigh, and soon his irregular breathing gave way to [Pg 145] deep and leaden slumber.

Odile arose, and her old governess, who had remained silent throughout, left the room with her. Sperver and I watched them as they slowly withdrew. There was a calm grandeur in the step of [Pg 146] the Countess that bespoke a consciousness of duty fulfilled.

When she had disappeared in the shadows of the corridor, Gideon turned to me: "Well, Gaston," he said gravely; "what do you think of this?" I bowed my head without replying. The [Pg 147] unaccountable firmness of the young woman dumbfounded me.

"Come Gaston!" exclaimed Sperver indignantly, "let's get a breath of fresh air! I'm strangling here!" and he pulled me out of the chamber.

"That is the happiness of high-born people!" he exclaimed, as we stepped into the hall. "What is the use of being master of Nideck, with its fine Castle, forests, and game-preserves, and all else, if your own daughter can blight your life,—even cause your death, perhaps, by a nod of her head or a mincing refusal to obey your will? It would be a thousand times better to come into the world the son of a humble woodcutter, and live in the quiet accomplishment of your labor. Come down [Pg 148] to my den, and we will drink a glass and have a pipe. I know nothing better to put care to flight than a good stiff glass."

It was then about nine o'clock. The sky, so clear at daybreak, had become overcast; the north wind was whirling the flakes against the window-panes, and I could hardly distinguish the peaks of the neighboring mountains. We were descending the staircase which led to the main courtyard, when, at a turn of the corridor, we came face to face with Tobias Offenloch. The worthy majordomo was puffing like a porpoise.

"Hullo!" said Gideon; "where are you going in such a hurry?"

"To tell the Countess that the Baron Zimmer begs the privilege of paying his respects to her [Pg 149] before quitting the Castle."

"Baron Zimmer?"

"Yes, the stranger who came in last night at midnight."

"To be sure," replied Sperver; "I was forgetting."

We went along. A moment later we reached our destination. My companion pushed open the door and we went in.

We sat down before the hearth. Gideon possessed himself of a corkscrew and two bottles, and soon our glasses were filled and pipes aglow. We were about to begin a discussion of the singular scene of a few moments before, when Offenloch appeared, but not alone, for to our astonishment we saw the Baron Zimmer and his valet following at his heels. We rose. The young Baron [Pg 150] approached to greet us with uncovered head, and I studied with interest his handsome face, pale and haughty, with long, black locks falling about it. He paused before Sperver.

"Monsieur," he said, with that pure Saxon accent that no dialect can imitate, "I come to ask you about the country hereabouts. Mademoiselle the Countess of Nideck assures me that no one can inform me as well as yourself in regard to the passes of the Wald Horn."

"I believe that is true, monsieur," replied Sperver with a low bow; "and I am entirely at your service."

"Imperative reasons compel me to set out in the midst of this storm," resumed the Baron, [Pg 151] pointing to the eddying flakes outside; "I must reach the Wald Horn, six leagues from here, before nightfall."

"That will be a difficult matter, monsieur, for all the roads are blocked with snow."

"I know it, but it must be done."

"A guide will be indispensable in that case. I will go with you if you like, monsieur, or Sebalt Kraft, the master of the hounds; he knows every inch of the mountain from Unterwalden to the Hunsdruck."

"Thank you for your obliging offer; I appreciate it most fully, but I cannot accept it; your instructions will be sufficient."

Sperver bowed again, and going over to a window, threw it wide open. A quick gust of wind [Pg 152] whirled the snow clear across the room and closed the door with a crash. I remained standing with one hand resting on the back of my chair; Tobias took refuge from the cold draught in a corner of the chamber. The Baron and his servant approached the window. [Pg 153]

"Messieurs," said Sperver, trying to make himself heard above the noise of the storm, and pointing towards the horizon, "this is the lay of the country. If the day were clear, I would take you up to the signal-tower, where we could see the whole of the Black Forest, until it becomes lost to view in the distance; but as it is, I will do my best from here. Yonder you see the peak of the Altenberg, and further off, in the same line, just back of that white ridge, the Wald Horn, swept by the tempest. You must go straight towards the Wald Horn. There, if the snow permits, you will see from the top of the mitre-shaped rock that is called the Roche Fendue, three peaks: the Behrenkopf, the Geierstein, and the Triefels. It is by the last one, the furthest to the right, that you must make your way. A torrent divides the valley of the Rhethal, but it must be frozen over now. However, if it is impossible to proceed further, you will find on your left, as you climb the summit, a cavern half-way to the top, known as the Roche Creuse. You can pass the night there, and to-morrow, in all probability, when the wind has fallen, you will see the Wald Horn."

"YONDER YOU SEE THE PEAK OF THE ALTENBERG.'"

"Many thanks for your kindness." [Pg 156]

"If you are fortunate enough to meet with a charcoal burner," continued Sperver, "he may be able to show you where the torrent can be forded, but I doubt if there is any such place at this season. Have a special care to keep around the base of the Behrenkopf, for if you get much to either side of it, the descent is impossible; there are precipices everywhere."

During these observations, I was watching Sperver, whose clear, ready speech accentuated each sentence with great precision, and I glanced occasionally at the Baron, who was listening with singular attention. No obstacle seemed to daunt him. His old servant appeared no less resolute than he.

Just as they were leaving the window, a ray of light broke through the clouds as the tempest [Pg 157] seized the masses of snow and whirled them for an instant back upon each other like a floating drapery, and during this instant the three peaks behind the Altenberg were disclosed to view, serving to illustrate the details which Sperver had just given. Then the blizzard once more closed in.

"Good!" said the Baron; "I have seen my destination, and thanks to your instructions, I hope to reach it."

Sperver bowed without replying, and the young man and his servant, together with Offenloch, having saluted us, silently withdrew.

Gideon closed the window, and addressing himself to me: "The Old Nick must possess a man," he said, laughing, "to set out in such weather! I shouldn't have the heart to turn a wolf outdoors. I [Pg 158] believe I have seen the young man's face before, and the old one's, too, if I could only think

where. Let us drink! Your health, Gaston!"

I had gone over to the window, and as the Baron Zimmer and his servant climbed into their saddles in the middle of the courtyard, I saw, in spite of the snow that filled the air, a curtain slightly raised in the tower opposite, and the pale face of the Countess appear, glancing long and furtively at the young man.

"Ha, Gaston, what are you doing?" cried Sperver.

"Nothing. I am only looking at the strangers' horses."

"Oh, yes, the Wallachians! I saw them in the stable this morning. They are fine creatures." [Pg 159]

The horsemen departed at full speed. The curtain in the tower window dropped. [Pg 160]

CHAPTER VII.

MARIE LAGOUTTE RELATES HER EXPERIENCE.

When I again saw Odile her expression was one of complete wretchedness; her swollen eyes told me that she had been weeping long, and her extreme pallor and weariness cut me to the heart.

"My dear mademoiselle," I said to her, with forced cheerfulness, "we must not be despondent. The turning-point of the malady must soon arrive, and this crisis safely passed, we may expect to see the Count in as good health as before." [Pg 161]

She looked at me with an expression of gratitude for my wish to console her, but underlying it, I felt there was a quiet conviction to the contrary, and I realized the weakness of my position when I reflected that she might very probably be possessed of facts, unknown to me, which entirely disproved my words.

"At all events," she replied, after a pause of some moments, "it is grateful to know that there is some one who shares our anxieties and has the desire really at heart to mitigate them."

"You speak truly, mademoiselle," I returned. "I desire nothing so much as to see peace and contentment restored to this house, and I only wish that I possessed a thousandfold more power to accomplish it than I do. But whatever my skill is, it shall be devoted to this one end; and I shall not despair of success until all my efforts have proved unavailing." [Pg 162]

I was surprised at my own warmth a moment after; but Odile's glance satisfied me that I had not transgressed the limits of that reserve with which she surrounded herself.

"And furthermore," I continued, encouraged by this fact to speak what I had for some time meditated, "if I might add the advice of a friend to that of the doctor, I should beg of you to spare yourself as much as possible in the matter of night watches and too unremitting a care of the Count, for a true woman's strength is exhausted long before her will, and you owe it to your friends as well as to yourself to preserve the life which God has entrusted to you." [Pg 163]

Odile lowered her eyes, then raised them; and as I approached and lifted to my lips the hand which she gave me, I surprised there a look which opened up to me a world of speculation.

I returned to my chamber, where I found an hour none too long to calm in a measure the exuberance of feeling to which my moments with Odile invariably gave rise.

Inclination made me quite as much concerned to spare Odile the suffering which her father's revolting harshness in his moments of delirium caused her, as to restore the Count to health, for after the morning's experience I felt that my pity for the sick man had, in spite of myself, largely given place to loathing; and I felt too, with Sperver, that I could throttle him as he continued to heap injuries upon his daughter's defenceless head. [Pg 164]

However, there was but one way to alter the present condition of things and to establish a better one; namely, to effect the Count's cure, and I resolved that the best effort of my life should be expended here. Meanwhile I knew not where to begin. Medicines used otherwise than as opiates seemed lacking in the smallest efficacy. I saw nothing for it but to await developments.

To remonstrate with Odile in the matter of the vow which she had taken was clearly out of the question, though I was curious to see if any yielding on her part would effect the change in her father's condition which he averred it would. [Pg 165]

And the reason of her absolute refusal to entertain even the thought of marriage? What could it be? She was not without feeling, a fact sufficiently demonstrated by her unswerving devotion to the Count. Nor did it seem to me that she could regard with disdain the fulfilment of that position which is the noblest aim and achievement of womankind, and which she was so eminently fitted by every circumstance of fortune to occupy and adorn. It could not be that there was any lack of understanding; for at times, when I surprised her glance resting upon me, I read in it a depth of sensibility that seemed almost unfathomable; and that its possessor was all kindness, in the strongest and best sense of the term, I was convinced. Of the answer to this riddle, it seemed then, I must forever remain in ignorance; but while any chance remained to solve it, I was [Pg 166]

determined to do so at all costs.

Meanwhile the Count's illness continued its course. All that Sperver had told me verified itself. Sometimes the Count, starting up and leaning on his elbow with outstretched neck and staring eyes, would mutter, "She is coming! She is coming!" Then Gideon would shake his head and climb the signal-tower; but in vain did he look to right and left: the Black Plague was nowhere to be seen.

After long reflection upon this strange malady, I had finally persuaded myself that the Count was deranged. The singular influence which the old creature exerted upon his mind, his alternate periods of delirium and calm, all served to strengthen me in this opinion. "Unknown chains unite his fate with that of the Black Plague," I said to myself. "That woman may have been young and beautiful in the past; who knows?" and my imagination, once launched in this direction, soon built up a romance; but I was careful to mention nothing of my thoughts,—Sperver would never have forgiven me for entertaining suspicions of a relationship between his master and the hag. [Pg 167]

During these anxious days, the one bright thing in my life was Odile's presence. Had it not been for this, I doubt if I should longer have preserved any degree of hope. [Pg 168]

I know not if I myself quite realized the extent of my growing affection for Odile, but certain it is that with each day her image became more and more identified with all that I held dearest in the world, and as I moved about the old Castle halls and chambers, the library, the drawing-room, the chapel, her fair figure and light step accompanied me in fancy, and I likened her to the delicate, fragrant rose, which in summer blossomed and waved from the rough interstices of the Castle's battlements.

Things were in this pass when one morning, at about eight o'clock, I was walking up and down in Hugh's Tower thinking of the Count's malady, the outcome of which I could foresee no more clearly than before, and cudgelling my wits to determine what was next to be done. Suddenly I was roused from these cheerless reflections by three discreet taps on my door. [Pg 169]

"Come in!"

The door opened, and Marie Lagoutte entered, dropping a low courtesy. The worthy woman's arrival annoyed me a good deal; I was on the point of asking her to leave me for the present, when an expression of unusual seriousness on her face aroused my curiosity. She had thrown a large red-and-green shawl over her shoulders, and stood with her lips pursed up and her eyes on the floor. It surprised me not a little to see her, after a moment, approach the door and open it again, apparently to make sure that no one had followed her. [Pg 170]

"What does she want of me?" I asked myself. "What do all these precautions mean?" I was puzzled.

"Monsieur," she said at length, drawing nearer me, "I beg your pardon for disturbing you so early in the morning, but I have something important to tell you."

"Pray go on! What is it about?"

"It is about the Count."

"Ah!"

"Yes, monsieur; you probably know that I sat up with him last night."

"I know you did. Pray sit down!"

She seated herself in a chair opposite me, a big, leather-covered armchair, and I remarked with interest the energetic character of the face which had seemed to me only grotesque on the evening of my arrival at the Castle. [Pg 171]

"Monsieur," she went on after a brief pause, fixing her dark eyes on me, "I must tell you first of all that I am not a timid woman. I have seen many things in my life,—things so terrible that nothing astonishes me any more. When any one has passed through Rossbach, Leuthen, and Zorndorf, he has left fear behind him on the road."

"You speak truly, madame!"

"I don't tell you this from a desire to boast, but only to convince you that I don't lose my wits at nothing, and that you may depend upon what I say when I tell you I have seen something."

"What the deuce can she have to tell me?" I said to myself.

"Well!" she continued; "last night, between nine and ten, just as I was starting up to bed, Offenloch came in and said to me: [Pg 172]

"'Marie, you must sit up with the Count to-night.'

"I was surprised at this, and replied:

"'What! sit up with the Count! Isn't madame going to sit up with him herself?'

"'No; our mistress is ill, and you must take her place.'

"Ill, poor child! I was sure it would end that way, and I told her so a hundred times; but what can

you do, monsieur? Young people never have any thought for the future,—and then, it was her own father, too. So I took my knitting, said good night to Toby, and went to the master's room. Sperver, who was waiting for me, went off to bed as soon as I came in, and I was left all alone." [Pg 173]

Here the good woman paused, slowly breathed up a pinch of snuff, and seemed to be brushing up her memory. I had become attentive.

"At about half past ten," she continued, "I was knitting away beside the bed, and every now and then I raised the curtain to see how the Count was doing; he never stirred; he was sleeping like a child. All went well up to eleven o'clock; then I began to feel tired; when you are old, monsieur, do what you will, you fall asleep in spite of yourself; and then, too, I didn't think anything was going to happen. I said to myself, 'He will sleep like a top till morning!'

"Towards midnight the wind died down, and the big windows that had been rattling all the evening were quiet. I got up to see if anything was going on outside. The night was as black as a bottle of ink, and I went back to my armchair. I took another look at the sick man and I saw that he hadn't stirred; then I went on knitting. After a few minutes, I fell slowly, slowly to sleep. My chair was as soft as down and the room was very warm; I couldn't keep awake. [Pg 174]

"I had been asleep about an hour, when a draught of cold air woke me. I opened my eyes, and what did I see? The long, middle window was wide open, the curtains were drawn, and the Count was standing upright on the window-sill!"

"The Count?" [Pg 175]

"Yes."

"Impossible! He cannot move!"

"I couldn't believe my eyes; but, nevertheless, I saw him as plainly as I see you this minute. He held a torch in his hand, and the air was so still that its flame never wavered."

I stared at Marie Lagoutte, stupefied.

"At first," she went on, "when I saw the master in this extraordinary position, it made such an effect on me that I wanted to scream; but then I thought, 'Perhaps he is walking in his sleep; if you cry out and wake him he will fall and be dashed to pieces.' So I kept still and watched him, as you can fancy. He raised his torch slowly, and then he lowered it, and he did this three times, like a man making signals to some one; then he threw it down on to the ramparts, closed the window, [Pg 176] and drew the curtains; he passed before me without appearing to see me, and got into bed again muttering Heaven knows what."

"Are you certain you saw all this, madame?"

"Perfectly!"

"It is strange!"

"Yes, I know it, but it is true! Goodness, how astonished I was for a moment! Then, when I saw him go back to bed again and cross his hands over his breast as if nothing had happened, I said to myself, 'Marie Anne, you have had a bad dream; that is the only explanation of it!' and I went over to the window. But the torch was still burning; it had fallen into a bush a little to the left of the third gate, and you could see it glowing like a spark. There was no denying it!" [Pg 177]

Marie Lagoutte looked at me for some minutes without speaking.

"You can imagine, monsieur, that there was no more sleep for me that night. I was on tenter-hooks; every moment I thought I heard something behind my chair. I wasn't afraid, but I was uneasy; it worried me. This morning, at the first signs of day, I ran to wake up Offenloch, and I sent him to the Count's bedside. As I went along the corridor I noticed that the first torch on the right was missing from its ring. I went down the stairs, and I found it in the little path that leads to the Black Forest. See! here it is!"

And she took from under her apron the end of a torch, which she laid on the table. I was [Pg 178] thunderstruck. How could this man, whom but the night before I had seen so weak and exhausted, have risen from his bed, walked to the window, and opened and closed the heavy sash? What did this midnight signal mean? Wide awake as I was, it seemed to me as if I, too, had witnessed the strange scene, and my thoughts reverted involuntarily to the Black Plague. I roused myself at last from introspection, and I saw Marie Lagoutte had risen and was about to depart.

"Madame," I said, as I moved with her to the door, "you have acted wisely in telling me this, and I thank you heartily for doing so. You have told no one else of this adventure?"

"No one, monsieur. Such things are only to be confided to the priest and doctor." [Pg 179]

"Ah! I see you are a very sensible person."

These words were exchanged on my threshold. At this moment, Sperver appeared at the end of the gallery, followed by his friend Sebalt.

"Ho, Gaston!" he cried, hurrying up; "I have news for you!"

"Well, well!" I exclaimed; "more news. The Old Harry is most certainly taking a hand in our affairs."

Marie Lagoutte had disappeared. The steward and his comrade entered the Tower. [Pg 180]

CHAPTER VIII.

SEBALT TRACKS THE PLAGUE.

Sperver's face wore a look of supreme indignation; Sebalt's one of bitter irony. The master of the hounds, whose melancholy appearance had struck me during my first days at Nideck, was as thin as a rail; he wore a leather jacket fastened at the waist by a belt, from which hung a hunting-knife with a bone handle; long leather gaiters reached above his knees, and his horn hung at his elbow from a shoulder belt that went from right to left across his chest. On his head was a broad-brimmed hat with a heron's plume in the band, and his profile, terminating in a yellowish beard, [Pg 181] suggested that of a goat.

"Yes," continued Sperver; "I have some news for you!"

He threw himself into a chair, burying his face in his hands, while Sebalt quietly drew his trumpet over his head and laid it on the table.

"Come, Sebalt," cried Gideon, "speak out!"

"The witch is roaming about the Castle."

This information would have failed to interest me had it not been for the interview with Marie Lagoutte; but now it made a deep impression upon me. There was some mysterious connection between the Lord of Nideck and this horrid creature, the nature of which was an enigma to me. I [Pg 182] felt that I must solve it at all costs.

"One moment, gentlemen! one moment!" I said to Sperver and his comrade; "first of all, I want to know where this Black Plague comes from."

Sperver stared at me in astonishment.

"Heaven only knows!" he cried.

"At precisely what time does she come within sight of Nideck?"

"I told you before! Just a week before Christmas every year."

"And she stays?"

"From a fortnight to three weeks."

"Is she ever seen except at that time, either going or coming?"

"No."

"Then we shall have to catch her!" I exclaimed. "This is not natural! We must find out what she [Pg 183] wants, who she is, and where she comes from."

"Catch her!" said the master of the hounds, with an odd smile. "Catch her, indeed!" and he shook his head meaningly.

"My dear Gaston," began Sperver, "your suggestion is all well enough, but it is easier said than done. If I could send a bullet after her, that would be another matter, for I can always come within gunshot of her, but this the Count forbids; and as to taking her otherwise, you might as well try to catch a squirrel by the tail. Listen to Sebalt's story, and you shall see for yourself."

The person thus addressed, sitting on the end of the table with his legs crossed, looked at me and began: [Pg 184]

"This morning, as I was coming down the Altenberg, I followed the hollow Nideck road. The snow was on a level with its edges. I was going along, thinking of nothing in particular, when a foot-track caught my eye; it was deep, and went straight across the path; the creature had come down one side of the bank and gone up on the other. It wasn't a hare's foot, for that makes hardly any mark in the snow; nor the cloven hoof of the wild boar, nor a wolf's paw either; it was a deep hole. I stopped and brushed away the snow that was collecting round it. It was the Black Plague's track!"

"How do you know that?"

"How do I know it? I know the old hag's footprint better than her figure, for I always go along with my eyes on the ground. I can recognize any one in the country around by his foot-tracks, and [Pg 185] a child couldn't have mistaken this one."

"What was there about it so very different from any other?"

"It is no larger than your hand; it is finely shaped, the heel a trifle long, the outline clean, and the great toe lies close to the others, as if they were pressed into a slipper. It is a beautiful foot. Twenty years ago, monsieur, I should have fallen in love with such a foot! Every time I come across one like it, it makes a great impression on me. Heavens! how can such a foot belong to the Black Plague?" And the good fellow fixed his eyes on the floor with a dismal air.

"Well, Sebalt, go on!" said Sperver impatiently. [Pg 186]

"To be sure! Well, I recognized the track, and I set out to follow it. I was in hopes of catching the witch in her den, but you shall hear what a dance she led me. I climbed up the roadside, only two gunshots from Nideck, and struck off into the bushes, keeping the trail always on my right; it ran along the edge of the Rhethal. Suddenly it jumped over the ditch into the woods. I kept on, but happening to glance a little to the left of it, I discovered another track that had been following the Black Plague's. I stopped; 'Could it be Sperver's? or Kasper Trumpf's? or any of the other people's?' I asked myself. I stooped over and examined it closely, and you can fancy my surprise when I saw that it belonged to nobody in this part of the country. I know every footprint from [Pg 187] here to Tübingen, and it was none of these. The owner must have come from a distance. The boot —for it was a kind of soft, well-made boot, with a spur that left a little rowelled line in the snow behind it—instead of being rounded at the end, was square; the sole, thin and without nails, bent at every step. The pace was short and hurried, like that of a man from twenty to twenty-five. I noticed the stitches in the leather at this glance, and I have never seen finer."

"Who could it have been?"

Sperver shrugged his shoulders and remained silent.

"Who can have any object in following the old woman?" I asked, turning to Sperver.

"The devil himself, perhaps," he replied. [Pg 188]

We sat for some minutes, each one busied with his own reflections.

"I started on again," pursued Sebalt finally; "the tracks led up the mountain side amongst the fir-trees, and then turned off around the base of the Roche Fendue. When I saw this, I said to myself, 'Ah! you old hag! If there was much game of your sort, the sport of hunting would go to the dogs. It would be better to work as a galley slave!' We came—the two tracks and I—to the top of the Schneeberg. The wind had swept here and the snow was up to my waist, but I must get on! I reached the banks of the Steinbach torrent and there the Black Plague's foot-prints ceased. I stopped, and saw that after having tried up and down, the gentleman's boots had taken the direction of the Tiefenbach. This was a bad sign. I looked at the opposite bank, but there was no [Pg 189] sign of a track there. The witch had waded either up or down the stream, to break the scent. Where should I go? To right or left? In my uncertainty, by Jove, I came back to Nideck."

"You have forgotten to tell the doctor about her breakfast."

"To be sure, monsieur! At the foot of the Roche Fendue, I saw she had lighted a fire; the snow was black around it; and I laid my hand on the spot, thinking that if it were still warm the Plague could not be far away, but it was as cold as ice. I noticed a snare in the bushes close by."

"A snare?"

"Yes; it seems the old creature knows how to manage traps. A hare had been caught in it; the [Pg 190] impression of his body was still there where he had lain stretched out. The witch had lighted the fire to cook him; she knows a thing or two, you see!"

"Just to think," cried Sperver angrily, "that this old wretch should find meat to feed on, when so many honest people of our villages are starving for the want of a bit of bread! It infuriates me! If I only had her in my clutches—!"

He had no time to finish his sentence. The next moment, we were staring into each other's ashy faces, speechless and immovable. A howl—the howl of a wolf on a bitter winter's night—a cry that you must have heard to comprehend in the least, the agonized plaint of the savage beast,—was [Pg 191] echoing through the Castle, and seemed not far from us. It rose from below, so fearfully distinct that we fancied the wild animal just outside our door.

We often hear quoted, as the most terrible of sounds, the roar of the lion, as he rends the silence of approaching night in the immensity of the desert. But if the parched and burning sands of Africa have their voice, like the sound of the autumn tempest growling among the crags of the forest, so, too, have the vast, snowy plains of the North their characteristic cry, that accords so well with the dreary winter landscape, where all is sleeping, and not even a dead leaf rustles to disturb the perfect stillness; and this cry,—it is the howl of the wolf! [Pg 192]

Rousing himself with difficulty, Sperver sprang from his chair, rushed to the window, and stared down at the foot of the Tower.

"Can a wolf have fallen into the moat?" he cried.

But the howls came from within the Castle. Then turning to us:

"Gaston! Sebalt!" he cried, "come on!"

We flew down the stairs four steps at a time, and rushed into the armory. Sperver drew his

hunting-knife, and Sebalt followed his example; they preceded me along the gallery. The cries were guiding us towards the chamber of the sick man. Sperver spoke no more, and hurried his steps. I felt a shudder pass over me; something forewarned us that an abominable scene was about to transpire before our eyes. [Pg 193]

As we approached the Count's apartment, we found the whole household afoot—hunters, kennel-keepers, and scullions, running this way and that, and asking each other, "What is the matter? where are the cries coming from?" Without waiting for anything, we dashed into the corridor which led to the Count's chamber, and in the vestibule we encountered the good Marie Lagoutte, who alone had had the courage to proceed there before us. She was holding in her arms the young Countess, who had fainted, and was hurrying her away as rapidly as she could. So agitated was I at this pathetic sight that for the moment I forgot the Count, and I sprang forward to Odile's aid; but Marie Lagoutte begged me to hurry to the Count, as her mistress was only in a faint and would soon revive, when she would be terribly distressed if I were not at her father's bedside. Realizing that in spite of my preferences my first duty was to my patient, I reluctantly quitted them, and hastened to overtake my companions. [Pg 194]

We reached the Count's room. The howls were coming from within. [Pg 195]

"THEN HE WOULD RESUME HIS FRIGHTFUL CRIES."

We stared at one another, trying in vain to explain the presence of such a guest. Our ideas were in utter confusion. [Pg 196] Sperver threw open the door, and with his hunting-knife tightly grasped, started to enter the room; but he paused on the threshold, motionless as a stone. I glanced over his shoulder, and the sight that presented [Pg 197] itself to my gaze froze the blood in my veins. The Count of Nideck, crouching on all-fours on the bed, his head bent forward and his eyes glowing fiercely, was uttering these terrible howls. He was the wolf! That low forehead, that long, pointed face, that bristling beard, that long, thin body, and those wasted limbs,—the expression, the cry, the attitude,—all bespoke the savage beast beneath a human mask. At times he would stop for a second to listen, and the tall curtains of the bed would tremble like leaves. Then he would resume his frightful cries.

Sperver, Sebalt, and I stood nailed to the floor; we held our breath. Suddenly the Count stopped; like the hunted animal that sniffs the breeze, he raised his head and listened. Far, far away beneath the lofty arches of [Pg 198] the snow-clad pines, a cry was heard; feeble at first, it seemed to grow louder as it was prolonged, and soon it rose clear and strong above the roaring of the storm. It was the she-wolf answering its mate.

Sperver, turning towards me with livid face, his arm pointing to the mountain, cried:

"Listen, it is the witch!"

The Count, motionless, with raised head and extended neck, his mouth wide open, and eyeballs glowing like coals, seemed to understand the meaning of the distant voice, lost in the midst of the deserted gorges of the Black Forest, and a certain savage joy gleamed in his face. At this moment Sperver cried in a broken voice: [Pg 199]

"Count of Nideck! What are you doing?"

The Count fell backwards as if thunderstruck. We rushed into the room to his assistance. The third attack had begun, and it was terrible to witness. [Pg 200]

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLAGUE IN MY CHAMBER.—THE MIDNIGHT SCENE ON THE ALTENBERG.

The Count of Nideck was in a dying condition. All that art might accomplish I had tried without avail, and at that moment, when life and death were struggling for the mastery, I was compelled to stand idly by and watch the sands of Time's hour-glass run out. Towards midnight, the Count seemed almost gone; his pulse beat feebly, and at times seemed to stop. Sometimes I thought the end was but the question of a few moments. At length, worn out with exhaustion and anxiety, I bid the weeping Sperver remain with his master while I repaired to the Tower to snatch a few [Pg 201] moments' sleep.

A bright fire was burning in my chamber. I threw myself on the bed without removing my clothes,

and soon fell into a heavy, troubled slumber. I slept thus, with my face turned towards the fire, whose rays danced upon the polished flagstones. After an hour, the fire suddenly started up, and as it often happens, the flame, rising and falling momentarily, beat upon the walls its great red wings and tired my eyelids. Lost in a vague slumber, I half opened my eyes to see whence came these alternate lights and shadows, when I was brought wide awake by an appalling sight.

[Pg 202]

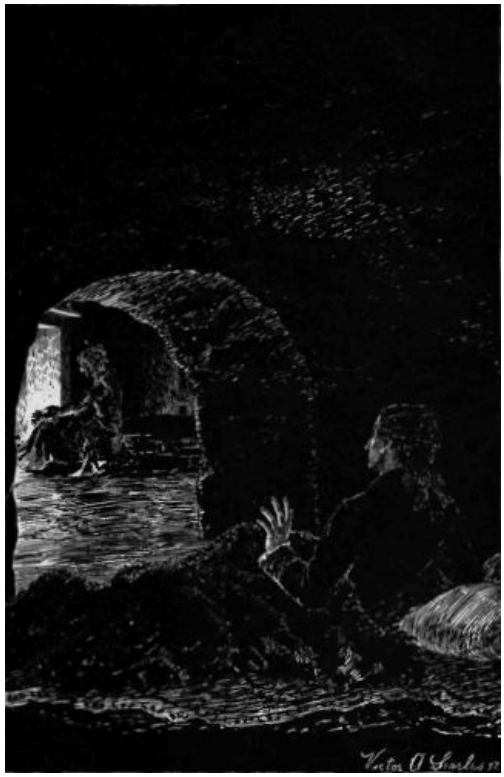
At the further end of the hearth, hardly revealed by the light of a few glowing embers, a dark profile was dimly visible,—the profile of the Black Plague. At first, I thought it an hallucination, the natural offspring of my feverish thoughts. I raised myself on my elbow, and stared fearfully in the direction, real or fancied, of the image. It was she indeed! Calm and motionless she sat, her hands clasped about her knees, just as I had seen her in the snow, with her long, thin neck, sharp, hooked nose, and thin lips tightly closed,—and she was warming herself before the fire.

[Pg 203]

[Pg 204]

I was horrified. How could the creature have got into my room? How could she have climbed the Tower, beneath which precipices yawned on every side? Everything that Sperver had told me concerning her mysterious power seemed no whit exaggerated. The vision of Lieverlé growling against the wall passed before me like a flash. I huddled close in the alcove, hardly daring to breathe, and watching this immovable silhouette as a mouse watches a cat from the bottom of its hole. The old woman stirred no more than the chimney-breast cut in the solid rock, and her lips moved as she mumbled inarticulate words.

[Pg 205]



"I RAISED MYSELF ON MY ELBOW AND STARED FEARFULLY IN THE DIRECTION."

[Pg 206]

My heart beat painfully fast, and my fear increased from moment to moment, as I gazed on the motionless figure amid the perfect silence. This lasted perhaps a quarter of an hour, when the fire catching a pine splinter, the flame leaped up and a few rays penetrated to the end of the room. This flash sufficed to show me the aged woman dressed in an old gown of purple brocade that shimmered violet and red in different lights, with a heavy bracelet on her left wrist and a gold arrow stuck through her thick, gray hair, which was coiled up on the back of her head. It was like an apparition of past ages.

Still, the Plague could have no hostile designs upon me, or she would have profited by my slumber to execute them. This thought was beginning to reassure me, when she suddenly got up and moved slowly towards my bed, holding in her hand a torch which she had just lighted at the fire. I now observed that her eyes were fixed and haggard. I made an effort to rise and cry out, but not a muscle of my body would obey my will, not a sound passed my lips, and the old witch, bending over me between the parted curtains, fixed her eyes on me with a strange smile. I tried to spring upon her and cry for help, but her glance paralyzed me as the snake's look charms the tiny bird. During this dumb contemplation, each second seemed to me an eternity. What was she about to do? I was prepared for anything. Suddenly she turned her head, listened, and then crossing the room with a rapid step, she opened the door. At last I had recovered a little courage; an effort of the will brought me to my feet, as if acted upon by an invisible spring, and I followed on the heels of the old woman, who with one hand was holding her torch above her head, and with the other kept the hall-door wide open.

[Pg 207]

[Pg 208]

I was about to seize her by the hair when, at the end of the long gallery, beneath the oval archway that opened upon the ramparts, I saw—the Count of Nideck! The Count of Nideck, whom I thought dying, clad in a huge wolf-skin, with its upper jaw projecting like a visor over his eyebrows, the claws resting on his shoulders, and the tail dragging behind him over the flagstones. He wore heavy boots, a silver clasp fastened the wolf-skin at his throat, and his expression, except for the dull, icy look in his eyes, bespoke the strong man born to command,—the master.

In the presence of such a personage my ideas became vague and confused. Flight was impossible. I had presence of mind enough left, however, to throw myself into an embrasure of the window.

[Pg 209]

The Count entered the chamber and fixed upon the old woman a rigid stare. They held a whispered conversation, of which I was able to hear nothing, but their gestures were full of meaning. The old hag pointed to the bed. They moved to the fireplace on tiptoe, and there in the shadow of the triforium the Black Plague unrolled a large bundle, grinning hideously meanwhile. Hardly had the Count caught sight of the sack, before he sprang to the bedside and disappeared between the curtains, which stirred in a strange fashion. I could only see one leg still resting on the floor, and the wolf's tail moving back and forth. They seemed to be enacting a mock murder scene.

[Pg 210]

Nothing could have been more horrible than this mute representation of such an act. The old

creature approached the bed in turn, and spread out her sack on the floor beside it. The curtains still moved, and their shadows danced upon the walls. Then a great movement succeeded. The old creature and the Count together crowded the bed clothes into the sack, stamping them down with the haste of a dog scratching a hole in the earth, and the Lord of Nideck, throwing the shapeless bundle over his shoulder, started for the door. A sheet dragged behind him, and the old woman followed him with her torch. They crossed the court.

My knees trembled and almost refused to support my weight; a prayer rose involuntarily to my lips. Two minutes had not passed before I was on their footsteps, dragged along by a subtle, [Pg 211] irresistible curiosity. I crossed the court at a run, and was about to enter the Gothic Tower, when I perceived a deep, narrow pit at my feet, and into its depths wound a staircase, down which I saw the hag's torch turning, turning about the stone baluster like a firefly, until it became lost in the distance.

I descended in turn the first steps of the staircase, guiding my course by the distant glimmer, when it suddenly disappeared. The old woman and the Count had reached the bottom of the precipice. Soon the steps ceased. I looked around me and discovered on my left hand a ray of moonlight that found its way into the pit through a low door, across the nettles and brambles [Pg 212] laden with hoar-frost. I put aside these bushes, clearing away the snow with my feet, and found myself at the foot of Hugh's donjon-tower. Who would have supposed that such a hole led up to the Castle? Who had shown it to the old woman? I did not stop to answer these questions. The vast plain lay before me, flooded with a light almost equal to that of day. To the right stretched the dark extent of the Black Forest, with its perpendicular rocks, its gorges and ravines. The night air was still and bitter cold; I felt exalted by the keen atmosphere. My first glance was to discover the direction which the old woman and the Count had taken. Their tall, dark forms were moving slowly up the mountain side some two hundred paces in advance of me, and stood out [Pg 213] against the background of the heavens studded with innumerable stars. I came close up to them at the bottom of the next ravine. The Count moved slowly on, the winding-sheet still dragging behind him. His attitude and movements, like those of his companion, were automatic in their precision.

On they went, some twenty paces before me, following the hollow road to the Altenberg, now in the shadow, now in the full light, for the moon was shining with surprising brilliancy. A few clouds followed her, and seemed as if stretching out their great arms to seize her; but she evaded them, and her rays, cold as a blade of steel, cut me to the heart. [Pg 214]

I would gladly have turned back, but an invisible power impelled me to follow this funeral procession. Even to this hour, I still see in fancy the path that winds beneath the colonnades of the Black Forest. I hear the snow crunching beneath my step, and the fallen leaves rustling in the gently stirring north wind. I still see myself following those two silent figures, and I try in vain to explain to myself the mysterious impulse which caused me to dog their footsteps.

At last we reached the forest and proceeded amongst the naked beeches, the dark shadows of whose higher boughs intersected the lower branches and traced their outlines on the snow-covered path. Sometimes I fancied I heard some one behind me; I would turn quickly around, but [Pg 215] could see nothing.

We gained at length the line of crags on the summit of the Altenberg, behind which the torrent of the Schneeberg rushes earlier in the year, but now there was only a mere thread of water slowly trickling beneath its thick covering of ice. The vast solitude no longer had its murmurs, its warblings, and its thunder; its oppressive stillness inspired fear. The Count and the old woman found a gap in the rocks, up which they mounted quickly and apparently without effort, while I was obliged to scramble up, clinging to the bushes in order to follow them.

Scarcely had I reached the top of the rock which forms a corner of the precipice, when I found myself within three yards of them, and before me I saw a bottomless abyss. On the left hung the [Pg 216] falls of the Schneeberg in sheets of ice. This resemblance to a wave leaping into the precipice, and bearing with it the neighboring trees, sucking up the underbrush and cleaving the ivys that follow on its crest without becoming uprooted; this appearance of mighty movement in the immovableness of death, and those two silent forms proceeding with their sinister work, all inspired me with indescribable terror. Nature herself seemed to share in my feelings.

The Count had laid down his burden; the old woman and he swung it for a moment above the precipice, then the long shroud floated over the edge, and the actors in this awful drama bent over to watch it as it fell. The long, white sheet, swelling upwards as it met the rising breath of [Pg 217] the chasm, and then falling slowly and disappearing from sight, still floats before my eyes. I see it sinking like the swan shot far up in the sky, her wings spread out and head thrown back, falling to earth in the agony of death.

At this moment a cloud which had long been approaching the moon slowly veiled her in its bluish folds; complete darkness succeeded. After a little the moon appeared again through a rift in the clouds, and I saw the old woman seize the Count's hand and drag him along with dangerous speed down the mountain side. Then it became dark again, and I dared not risk a step lest I should fall headlong into an abyss. Once more the clouds parted. I looked about me and found [Pg 218] myself alone on the high rock, knee-deep in snow. Seized with horror, I made my way cautiously down the steep declivity, and once on the plain I started to run towards the Castle, as much stunned as if I had shared in some dark crime.

As for the Lord of Nideck and the old woman, I had lost sight of them. [Pg 219]

CHAPTER X.

I LOSE MY WAY AND PASS THE NIGHT IN THE DWARF'S LODGE.

I wandered around the Castle, unable to find the opening through which I had come out on to the plain. So much anxiety and emotion began to tell upon my mind; I moved aimlessly along, asking myself with dread if madness were not playing a part in my fancies, unable to believe what I had seen, and yet alarmed at the clearness of my perceptions. The image of the master of Nideck waving his torch in the darkness, howling like a wolf, coolly accomplishing an imaginary crime, without omitting a gesture, a circumstance, not even the smallest detail, then escaping and committing to the abyss the secret of the murder, harassed my mind and hung over me like a nightmare. I ran breathless and distracted through the snow, not knowing in what direction to guide my steps. [Pg 220]

As day approached, the cold became more intense. At last, exhausted, my legs feeling like lead, and my ears half frozen, I succeeded in discovering the iron grating, and I rang the bell with all my might. It was then about four o'clock in the morning. Knapwurst kept me waiting a terribly long time. His little lodge, built against the rock, just within the principal gate, remained quite silent; it seemed to me that the dwarf would never finish dressing, for I had fancied him in bed and soundly sleeping. [Pg 221]

I rang again, and this time his grotesque figure emerged abruptly from his doorway, and he cried furiously:

"Who's there?"

"I! The Doctor!"

"Ah! that is another matter! I'll see whether you are telling the truth."

He went back into his lodge to get a lantern, crossed the outer court with the snow up to his middle, and staring at me through the grating:

"I beg your pardon, monsieur the doctor," he said; "I thought you were asleep up-stairs in Hugh's Tower. It was you ringing! Now I see why Sperver came to me at midnight to ask if any one had gone out. I said no, for I never saw you go out." [Pg 222]

"But for Heaven's sake, Knapwurst, open the door! You can tell me all this later."

"Be patient for a moment, monsieur."

And the dwarf deliberately turned the lock and drew back the bolts, while I stood with my teeth chattering, and shivering from head to foot.

"You are cold, Doctor," observed the diminutive porter, "and you cannot get into the Castle. Sperver has fastened the inside door, I don't know why; he doesn't ordinarily; the grating is enough. Come into the lodge and warm yourself. You won't find my room much to boast of; properly speaking, it is nothing but a sty, but when you are cold you don't spend much time in looking about." [Pg 223]

Without replying to his chatter I followed him as rapidly as possible, burning with impatience to learn what things were passing in the Castle, but seeing nothing for it but to wait till dawn.

We entered the lodge, and in spite of my state of complete frigidity, I could not help admiring the picturesque disorder of this species of nest. The slate roof leaned against the rock on one side, and on the other against a wall six to seven feet high, disclosing to view the blackened beams propped up against each other. The lodge consisted of a single room, furnished with a bed which the gnome did not take the trouble to make up very often, and two small dusty windows with hexagonal panes which the moon turned to mother-of-pearl with its pale rays. A large, square table occupied the middle of the room. How this massive oak table had ever been brought through the narrow doorway, it would have been difficult to explain. Upon a few shelves were arranged some old volumes and rolls of parchment, and on the table lay open an enormous tome with illuminated initial letters, bound in vellum, with a silver clasp and corners; it looked to me like a collection of old chronicles. Lastly, two armchairs, one covered with red leather and the other upholstered with a down cushion, and bearing the unmistakable impression of the dwarf's body, completed the furniture of the place. [Pg 224]

I will not stop to describe the desk with its five or six pens, the tobacco jar, the pipes scattered variously about, the little, low, iron stove in one corner of the room, with its door standing open, red hot, and sending a shower of sparks from time to time on to the stone floor, and the spitting cat with her back arched and her paw lifted in defiance of me. [Pg 225]

All these objects were veiled in that smoky amber light which rests the eye, and of which the old Flemish masters alone possessed the secret.

"So you went out last night, monsieur the doctor," Knapwurst said to me when we were comfortably seated, he before his volume and I with my hands stretched out before the fire.

"Yes, rather early. A woodcutter of the Black Forest needed my services; he had cut his left foot with an axe stroke." [Pg 226]

This explanation appeared to satisfy the dwarf; he lighted his black pipe, which hung down over his chin.

"You don't smoke, monsieur?"

"Indeed I do!"

"Well, help yourself to a pipe! I was just here," he said, stretching his long, yellow hand over the page, "reading the chronicles of Hertzog when you rang."

I now understood why he had kept me standing so long in the cold.

"You waited to finish your chapter," I said smiling.

"Yes, monsieur," he admitted; and we laughed together.

"However, if I had known it was you, I should have put it off till another time," he added.

A silence of some minutes followed, during which I studied the truly remarkable physiognomy of [Pg 227] the dwarf: those deep wrinkles at the corners of his mouth, those little squinting eyes, the broad, unshapely nose rounded at the end, and especially his swelling, double-storied forehead. I noticed in his face something of the expression of Socrates, and as I warmed myself before the crackling blaze, I reflected upon the strange fortunes of certain of us.

"Here is this dwarf," I said to myself, "this unsightly, stunted creature, exiled into a corner of Nideck like the cricket that sings beneath the hearthstone; this Knapwurst, who, in the midst of all these excitements, hunting-parties and gay cavalcades going and coming, the baying of hounds, stamping of horses, and winding of the hunters' horn, lives quietly alone, buried in his [Pg 228] books, and thinking only of times long past, indifferent whether all is in songs or tears around him, whether it is spring, summer, or autumn that comes to peep in at him through his little dusty window panes, reanimating, warming or chilling the breast of Nature outside. While others are living, blessed with the hope and magic of love, striving to gratify ambition or avarice, plotting, coveting, and longing, he hopes for nothing, covets nothing, wishes nothing. He sits and smokes his pipe, and with his eyes fixed on the old parchment before him, he dreams and revels in things that no longer exist, perhaps never had any existence—what matters it to him—'Hertzog says this,' 'such a one has it differently,'—and he is happy. His parchment skin gets more and [Pg 229] more wrinkled, his sharp elbows dig holes in the table, while his long fingers bury themselves in his cheeks, and his little gray eyes roam over Latin, Greek, and Etruscan characters. He goes into ecstasies, he licks his lips like a cat who has just lapped up a saucer of cream, and then he lies down on his cot, with his knees drawn up under the coverlid, and thinks he has passed the best possible kind of a day. O God of Heaven! Is it at the top or at the bottom of the ladder that we find the true application of your laws, and the accomplishment of the duties you have imposed?"

Meanwhile the snow was melting from my legs, and the grateful warmth of the stove restored my [Pg 230] spirits. I felt reanimated in this atmosphere of tobacco smoke and resinous pine. Knapwurst laid his pipe on the table, and passing his hand once more across the folio:

"Monsieur de la Roche," he said in a grave tone that seemed to come from the bottom of his conscience, or if you prefer, from the depths of a twenty-five gallon cask, "here is the law and the prophets."

"How do you mean, Knapwurst?"

"Parchment, old parchment, is what I love. These old yellow leaves, eaten by worms, are all that is left us of times long gone by, from Charlemagne to our own day. The ancient families have disappeared, but the old parchments remain. Where would be the glory of the Hohenstauferns, [Pg 231] the Liningens, the Nidecks, and so many other noble families, were it not for these? Where would be the fame of their title-rights, their deeds of arms, their heroic actions, their distant expeditions to the Holy Land, their ancient alliances and claims, and their conquests, did they not stand in these chronicles? These lofty barons, dukes, and princes would be as if they never existed—they and everything relating to them far and near.

"Their great castles, fortunes, and palaces crumble and fall, and their ruins serve as vague reminders. Of all this a single memorial remains,—the chronicles, the history, the songs of bards and minnesingers,—parchment alone is left to us!" [Pg 232]

A brief silence followed, then Knapwurst resumed:

"And in those distant times, when brave knights went forth to war, disputing and fighting over a bit of forest, title, or a lesser matter yet, with what contempt did they look upon this wretched little scribe, this man of letters and mystery, clad in ratteen, his only weapon an ink bottle dangling at his belt, and the handle of his pen for a plume. How often they jeered him, crying, 'That fellow is an atom, a flea; he is good for nothing; he cannot even collect our taxes or manage our estates, while we fine chaps go out on our mounts with lance in hand, ready for anything that comes in our way!' Thus they talked when they saw the poor devil dragging along behind them, [Pg 233]

shivering in winter, sweating in summer, and growing feeble in his old age. Ah, well! this atom, this flea, has caused them to survive long after their castles have turned to dust and their arms have rusted away, and for my part I love these old parchments; I respect and revere them. Like ivy, they clothe the ruins and prevent the old walls from crumbling away and becoming entirely effaced."

Having given such expression to his thoughts, Knapwurst seemed grave, and reflecting upon these things his eyes filled with the tears of affectionate remembrance. The dwarf loved those who had tolerated and protected his ancestors. After all, he spoke the truth; there was profound good sense in his words. His warmth surprised me. [Pg 234]

"Have you learned Latin, Knapwurst?" I asked him.

"Yes, monsieur," he replied, "I taught myself Latin and Greek. Old grammars were enough,—some of the Count's thrown into the ash-barrel; they fell into my hands and I devoured them. Some time after, the Lord of Nideck having chanced to hear me make some Latin quotation was surprised.

"'Who taught you Latin, Knapwurst?' he asked.

"'I taught myself, monseigneur.'

"He asked me some questions, which I answered pretty well.

"'By Jove!' he cried, 'Knapwurst knows more than I do! He shall keep my archives.'

"And he gave me the key to the archive chamber. During the thirty years since then, I have read every page. Sometimes the Count, seeing me on my ladder, stops a minute and says to me: [Pg 235]

"'Ha! ha! What are you doing up there, Knapwurst?'

"'I am reading the family records, monseigneur.'

"'And you enjoy it?'

"'Very much, monseigneur.'

"'Well, well! I am glad to hear it; if it weren't for you, Knapwurst, who would know of the glory of the Nidecks?' and he goes off laughing. I do as I please here!"

"He is a good master then?"

"Oh, monsieur, what a heart, and what kindness!" exclaimed the dwarf, clasping his hands. "He has but one fault." [Pg 236]

"And what is that?"

"He has no ambition."

"How so?"

"Why, he could have attained to anything. A Nideck! One of the most illustrious families of Germany! Think of that, monsieur! He had only to choose; he might have been a minister or a field-marshal. But no! In his youth he retired from political life. With the exception of a campaign that he conducted in France, at the head of a regiment which he raised by his own exertions—with this exception, he has always lived far from noise and strife, simple and almost unknown, only interesting himself in his hunting."

These details were of the greatest interest to me. The conversation was taking, of its own accord, the direction that I most wished, and I resolved to profit by my opportunity. [Pg 237]

"The Count has never had any great passions in his life, then?" I asked.

"None, monsieur; and that is the pity, for noble passions make the renown of great families. It is a misfortune for the member of a noble race to be devoid of ambition. He allows his family to degenerate. I could cite many examples in proof of what I say. That which would be the pride of the tradesman's family, would be the ruin of the illustrious."

I was amazed; all my speculations regarding the Count's past life were fast being disproved.

"However, the Count has met with many reverses, has he not?"

"Of what nature?" [Pg 238]

"He has lost his wife?"

"Yes, you are right; his wife was an angel. He married her for love; she was a daughter of one the oldest and noblest families of Alsace, but ruined by the Revolution. The Countess Odette was her husband's sole happiness. She died of a lingering illness that lasted over the space of five years; every means was resorted to to save her life. They travelled together in Italy, but she returned worse than she went, and succumbed some three weeks after their return. The Count came near dying himself of a broken heart. For two years he shut himself up and would see nobody. His dogs and horses were neglected. Time at length calmed his grief, but there has ever been something here." (The dwarf laid his finger on his heart.) "You understand; it is a bleeding wound. Old wounds pain us in change of weather, and old griefs, too, when the flowers spring up [Pg 239]

above the tomb, and in autumn when the dead leaves cover the ground. The Count has never wished to marry again; his daughter is the sole object of his affection."

"So this marriage was always a happy one?"

"Happy? It was a blessing for everybody!"

I was silent. Evidently the Count had not committed, could not have committed, a crime. I was obliged to yield to the weight of evidence; but then that nocturnal scene, these strange relations with the Black Plague, that horrible pantomime and the remorse in a dream which forced the [Pg 240] couple to betray their past—what did it all mean? I became lost in thought.

Knapwurst relighted his pipe and reached me one, which I accepted. The chill which had seized me had by this time passed away. I was experiencing that delicious period of inaction which follows the fatigue caused by unusual exertions, when, sprawled out in a big armchair in the chimney-corner and enveloped in a cloud of smoke, you abandon yourself to the pleasure of repose and listen to the blending of the cricket's chant with the unearthly singing of the green log on the hearth. We sat thus for a quarter of an hour.

"The Count sometimes gets angry with his daughter," I ventured to remark. Knapwurst started, and fixing on me a suspicious, almost hostile look, replied: [Pg 241]

"I know, I know!"

I watched him with a sidelong glance, thinking that I might learn something new, but he added ironically:

"The towers of Nideck are high, and slander flies too low to reach them!"

"Undoubtedly; but it is a fact, nevertheless, is it not?"

"Yes; but this is a mere crotchet, an effect of his malady. Once the crisis is passed, all his affection for the Countess Odile returns. It is curious, monsieur, a lover of twenty years could not be more devoted, more affectionate than he. This young woman is his one joy and pride. Only fancy, no less than a dozen times I have seen him ride off to get her a dress, or flowers, or some like trifle. He would not entrust this commission to any one, not even to his faithful Sperver. The [Pg 242] Countess does not even dare to express a wish in his presence, lest he should commit some new extravagance. In a word, monsieur, I assure you that the Count of Nideck is the worthiest of men, the tenderest of fathers, and the best of masters. As for the poachers who ravaged his forests, the old Count Ludwig would have hanged them without mercy; but our Count tolerates them; he even makes them his gamekeepers. Take Sperver, for instance! If Count Ludwig was still alive, Sperver's bones would be clicking together like castanets, at the end of a rope, while as it is, he is the steward and man-of-affairs at the Castle." [Pg 243]

My theories were fast falling to the ground. I rested my head between my hands and thought for a long time. Knapwurst, supposing that I was asleep, had resumed his reading. The gray dawn appeared through the tiny panes; the lamplight paled, and vague murmurs arose within the Castle. Suddenly footsteps sounded outside, some one passed before the window, the door opened abruptly, and Gideon appeared on the threshold. [Pg 244]

CHAPTER XI.

I AM SUMMONED TO THE COUNTESS' CHAMBER, AND MAKE A CONFESSION.

Sperver's pale face and rapid glance intimated that something unusual was happening; nevertheless, he was calm and did not appear surprised at my presence in Knapwurst's room.

"Gaston," he said briefly, "I have come to get you!"

I rose without replying and followed him. No sooner had we left the lodge than he seized me by the arm and drew me hastily towards the Castle.

"The Countess Odile wants to speak to you," he whispered.

"The Countess! Is she ill?" [Pg 245]

"No, she is quite recovered, but something unusual is going on. This morning at about one o'clock, thinking that the Count was about to breathe his last, I went to wake the Countess, but as I was on the point of ringing, my heart failed me. 'Why should I fill her with despair?' I asked myself. 'She will learn of her misfortune soon enough; and then to wake her up in the middle of the night, when she is so frail and broken by so much sorrow, might prove her own death-blow.' I stood some minutes reflecting what course to pursue, and at last I decided to take the responsibility upon myself, and I returned to the Count's room. I looked about; no one was there. Impossible! the man was in his last agonies! I ran along the corridor like a madman; no one was [Pg 246] to be seen! I entered the gallery; no one there! Then I lost my head and rushed again to the Countess Odile's chamber. This time I rang. She appeared in tears.

"'My father is dead?'

"'No, madame!'

"'He has disappeared?'

"'Yes; I left the room for a moment, and when I returned—'

"'And Monsieur de la Roche; where is he?'

"'In Hugh's Tower.'

"'In the Tower!'

"She threw on a dressing-gown, seized a lamp and hurried out. I remained behind. A quarter of an hour afterwards she returned, her feet covered with snow, and very pale; it was pitiful to see. She set the lamp on the mantelpiece, and looking steadily at me, she said: [Pg 247]

"'Was it you who put the doctor in the Tower?'

"'Yes, madame.'

"'Unhappy man! you will never know the harm that you have done!'

"I wanted to reply, but she stopped me.

"'That is enough! Go and fasten all the doors and lie down. I will sit up myself. To-morrow morning you will go and find the doctor in Knapwurst's lodge, and you will bring him to me. Breathe no word of this to anybody! Remember you have seen nothing and know nothing!'"

"Is that all, Sperver?"

He nodded gravely.

"And the Count?" [Pg 248]

"He has come back again; he seems better."

We had reached the antechamber. Gideon knocked gently on the door, then opened it, announcing, "Monsieur the doctor." [Pg 249]

"I STEPPED FORWARD AND FOUND MYSELF IN THE PRESENCE OF ODILE."

I stepped forward and found myself in the presence of Odile. Sperver withdrew, closing the door behind him.

A strange impression was produced upon my mind by the appearance of the young Countess, robed in a long gown of black velvet, and standing pale and firm with her hand resting on the back of an armchair, her eyes glistening with a feverish light. [Pg 250]

"Monsieur," she said, pointing to a chair; "pray be seated. I wish to speak with you upon a very grave subject." [Pg 251]

I obeyed silently. She seated herself in turn, and seemed trying to arrange her thoughts.

"Chance, monsieur," she continued after a moment, fixing her large blue eyes upon me—"chance or Providence, I know not which to call it—has made you the witness of a mystery in which is involved the honor of our family."

She knew everything, then. I was astonished.

"Let us call it Providence!" I cried. "Who knows but that through me the spell that has so long overhung the Castle is destined to be broken?"

"All this is frightful!" she continued; then in a despairing tone, "My father is not guilty of this crime!"

I sprang up, and stretching out my hands deprecatingly, I exclaimed: [Pg 252]

"I know it, mademoiselle; I know of the Count's past life, and it is one of the purest that it would be possible to conceive!"

Odile half rose from her chair as if to protest against any harsh judgment of her father, but seeing me myself undertake his defence, she sank back, and covering her face with her hands, burst into tears.

"God bless you, monsieur," she murmured; "had you entertained a suspicion of my father, it would have killed me!"

"Why, mademoiselle! Who could mistake for realities the unreasoning actions of the

somnambulist?"

"That is true, monsieur. I had reflected upon this myself—but appearances—I feared—pardon me —but I should have remembered that you are a man of honor." [Pg 253]

"Pray, dear Countess, calm yourself!" I exclaimed, feeling myself on the verge of losing my composure, so deeply was I moved by the grief of my beloved mistress.

"No," she cried; "let me weep. These tears are a relief. I have suffered so for the past ten years! This secret, so long locked in my breast, was killing me, and I should have died at last like my dear mother! God has taken pity on me, and he has sent you to share the burden with me. Let me tell you all, monsieur, let me—" She could not continue; her voice was stifled in sobs. Her proud and high-strung nature, after having conquered grief so long, had succumbed to the fateful happening of the night before; the seal once broken and her secret betrayed, her vanquished [Pg 254] nature, still struggling to shield its sacred trust, sought a grateful relief in unrestrained tears.

My one sentiment of love and sympathy, repressed until that moment, now demanded expression with a power which I was unable to gainsay. I cast all prudence to the winds, and dropping on one knee beside Odile, I seized the delicate hands that covered her face and drew them gently away until her sorrowing glance rested on my face.

"Odile!" I said, as her name rose naturally to my lips, in a voice so choked with emotion as to be hardly more than a whisper, "forgive my rashness, but it no longer rests with me to speak or not as I choose! I might never have said anything of this, at least not now, but your suffering affects [Pg 255] me so powerfully that to be silent longer is not within my power. It must have been evident to you, had you cared to read it, that I love you and have loved you, far, far dearer than life itself, ever since my eyes first rested upon you in the Count's chamber, that first night when I came to the Castle. I cannot ask pardon for it! No! For I am convinced that no man could be near you for even this brief time and experience the wonderful charm of your being, to say nothing of witnessing your present sorrow, without feeling himself moved to the depths of his own nature. Odile, I love you! I see no goal in life but you, no future but one passed in your divine companionship; and though you might well reproach me for choosing such a moment to tell you [Pg 256] so, believe me, it is through no wish to take advantage of your confidence. Did I feel myself guilty of such baseness, I should despise myself more than you could possibly do. Odile, my darling, I could not choose but speak. I must tell you this, even though it should be at the cost of your further favor!"

As I spoke, Odile's eyes were fastened on my face with an expression of surprise, indeed, but in it there was no trace of disfavor, and her hands were not withdrawn from mine. A bright flush that, for the first time since I knew her, had succeeded to her usual pallor, mounted to her cheeks and served to increase her matchless beauty. [Pg 257]

She remained silent for some moments still, and I could perceive the agitation which my words had caused her, by the slight tremor of her frame and her quickened breathing.

At length she began, with her clear, frank gaze fastened on my face:

"I am deeply sensible of the honor you do me in expressing yourself as you have done, and I am convinced that no woman can do otherwise than feel a sense of the greatest satisfaction in knowing that she is so regarded by an honorable man. I must confess," she continued after a moment of hesitation, "that your words are far from being indifferent or unwelcome to me! Oh, how strange are the circumstances of my life! I know not how to reply to you! I know not—" [Pg 258]

And she paused, at a loss how to continue.

I was happy. Odile had confessed enough to make me feel that I could bide my time for the present without endangering my future hopes; indeed, I felt that it might be wisdom to grant her time more fully to determine her sentiments, before pursuing the victory already won. I was now about to share in the secret of her life at her own request; and I resolved, if the reason of her vow should be explained, as I felt it must, to controvert it by any honorable means.

"You have said enough to make me supremely happy!" I exclaimed. "You have not denied me the happiness of hope, and I shall not despair! Meanwhile, whatever I may win is fairly mine, is it not?" [Pg 259]

"Yes," murmured Odile, with just the slightest smile, in which I fancied there was less sorrow than before.

"And now, dear one, I fear I have been selfish in intruding my own feelings where so much grief is present! Pray forgive me, and continue your story."

I pressed her hands once more, and as she gently disengaged them I resumed my chair.

Odile dried her tear-stained cheeks, and resting her face on her fair hand she began:

"When I go back into the past, and return to my earliest dreams, I see again my mother. She was a stately woman, pale and silent, and still young at the time of which I am now speaking. She was scarcely thirty years, and you would have thought her at least fifty. White locks veiled her [Pg 260] thoughtful forehead; her thin cheeks and severe profile, and her lips ever firmly closed with an expression of pain, gave to her features a strange character, in which grief and pride were blended. There was nothing that suggested youth in this old woman of thirty; nothing but her

upright, haughty bearing, her brilliant eyes, and her voice, pure and sweet as the dreams of childhood. She often walked up and down for hours together in this very chamber, with her head bowed down, and I ran happily along by her side, little knowing that my mother was deep in sorrow, too young to comprehend the grief that was preying upon her heart. I knew nothing of the past; the present alone possessed any reality for me; this was happiness, and the future was but to-morrow's play." Odile smiled sadly, and resumed: [Pg 261]

"Sometimes it happened that in the midst of my dancing about her, I would interrupt my mother's walk, and she would stop, and seeing me at her feet, bend down and kiss me on the forehead with a far-off smile; then she would resume her interrupted walk. Since then, when I have wished to search my memory for remembrances of those early days, this tall, pale woman has appeared before me like the image of melancholy itself. There she is," she exclaimed, pointing to a picture on the wall; "not such as illness made her, as my father believed, but that terrible and fatal secret. Look!"

I turned, and my glance falling suddenly upon the portrait which the young girl indicated, I shuddered. It was a long, thin, pale face, stamped with the cold rigidity of death, and with dark hollows under the eyes, which looked at you with a fixed, burning gaze of terrible intensity. There was a moment's silence. [Pg 262]

"How she must have suffered!" I exclaimed, with a sinking of the heart.

"I know not how my mother made this frightful discovery," continued Odile; "but she knew of the mysterious attraction of the Black Plague, and of their meetings in Hugh's Tower,—all, in short,—but she never suspected my father. No! only she slowly pined away, as I am doing now."

I hid my face in my hands, and the tears started involuntarily. [Pg 263]

"One winter night," she went on, "when I was only ten years old, my mother, whose energy alone sustained her,—for she was in the last stages of a decline,—came to my room. I was sleeping, when suddenly a cold, nervous hand seized my wrist. I opened my eyes, and opposite me stood a woman; with one hand she held a torch, and with the other she held my arm, which felt as if clasped in a chill vise. Her dress was covered with snow, a convulsive trembling agitated her limbs, and her eyes burned with a dark fire through the white, disordered locks that hung about her face. It was my mother.

"'Odile, my child, rise and come with me! You must know everything!' she said.

"I dressed myself tremblingly, and leading me along the lonely corridors to Hugh's Tower, she showed me the staircase that led down to the chasm. [Pg 264]

"'Your father will come out this way,' she said, pointing to the tower; 'he will come out with the she-wolf. Fear nothing! He cannot see you.'

"Hardly had she finished speaking, when my father appeared with the old woman, carrying his funereal burden. Taking me in her arms, my mother followed them, and I witnessed the scene on the Altenberg.

"'Look, child!' she cried; 'you must, for I am going to die, and you shall keep the secret! You shall watch over your father alone—all alone! The honor of our family depends upon it!'

"We returned. A fortnight later my mother died, leaving to me the accomplishment of her vow and the lesson of her example. I have faithfully discharged my trust, but oh, at what a cost! You have seen it! I have been obliged to disobey my father and make him wretched. My marriage could have accomplished nothing, though he does not know it, and to marry would have been to bring a stranger into our midst and betray the family secret. I resisted. No one in the Castle knows the nature of my father's malady, and had it not been for yesterday's crisis, which broke down my strength and prevented me from watching by my father, I should still have been the sole depositary of the secret. God has willed otherwise; he has placed in your keeping the honor of our family. [Pg 265]

"Such is my story, and in view of what you told me a few moments ago (and she colored charmingly), I feel that I need hardly ask you if you will share with me my burden, for my strength is unequal to it—I am bending beneath its weight." [Pg 266]

She had risen as she finished speaking. For all answer, I sprang forward, and throwing my arms about her I drew her close to me and covered her upturned face and forehead with passionate kisses, and she rested, a delicious burden in my arms.

"Odile," I cried, "I will be all this and a thousand times more, if you will only consent to let me. I am the petitioner, not you; and in allowing me to share with you even the least of your trials, you make me forever your debtor. You have told me the reason of your vow, and in doing so you have removed the necessity for its further existence. Oh, Odile, may I hope—may I hope, I say, that if I can raise the spell which overhangs the Castle, and restore your father's health,—as the price of it, I may have your love?" [Pg 267]

After a moment, she replied softly, as she gently disengaged herself from my arms:

"You may;" and she added, "until then my first duty is ever to my father."

I pressed the hand which she yielded to me to my lips, exclaiming with a smile, "This seals the

promise!"

Then I continued:

"And one thing more. We must seize this creature known as the Black Plague, and find out what she is, whence she comes, and what she wants here." [Pg 268]

"Oh," she exclaimed, with a motion of her beautiful head, "I fear that is impossible!"

"Who can say that?" I replied. "I want only your permission, and I will undertake to seize the Plague at once."

"Do as your judgment dictates. I consent to everything beforehand."

I took a long and reluctant leave of Odile, and hurried jubilantly to Sperver's room. [Pg 269]

CHAPTER XII.

WE CHASE THE PLAGUE.—HER DEATH.

An hour after my conversation with Odile, Sperver and I were galloping hard over the plain from Nideck. The huntsman, bending over his horse's neck, set spurs to her from time to time, and the tall Mecklenberg, with flying mane and foaming lips, literally cleaved the air in her flight. As for my mount, I believe he took the bit in his teeth, and ran away with me. Lieverlé accompanied us, bounding along beside us like an arrow. We seemed to be borne along on the wings of the wind.

The towers of Nideck were far behind us, and Sperver was leading the way, as usual, when I shouted to him: [Pg 270]

"Hallo, comrade! Pull up! Before we go any further, let us deliberate a little."

He wheeled about.

"Only tell me, Gaston, is it to right or left?"

"No, no! Come here. You must first know why I have started off this morning. In a word, we are going to catch the hag!"

An expression of supreme satisfaction lighted up the long, bronzed face of the old steward; his eyes sparkled.

"Ha, ha!" he exclaimed; "I knew it would come to that sooner or later."

With a movement of his shoulder, he slipped his rifle into his hand. This significant movement opened my eyes. [Pg 271]

"One moment, Sperver. We are not going to kill the Black Plague; we are going to take her alive."

"Alive!"

"Precisely; and to spare you future regrets, I warn you that the destiny of the old creature is identified with our master's. The ball that strikes her down kills the Count."

Sperver sat open-mouthed with amazement.

"Is this really so?"

"Positively."

There was a long silence; our horses tossing their heads at each other as if in salute, pawed the snow impatiently. Lieverlé yawned expectantly and stretched out his long, snake-like body, and Sperver sat motionless, with his hand resting on his rifle. [Pg 272]

"Well, then, we will try to take her living," he said at length; "we will handle her with kid gloves, since it must needs be so; but it is not such an easy matter as you think, Gaston."

Pointing with his extended hand to the mountains which lay unrolled about us in the form of a great amphitheatre, he added:

"You see before us the Altenberg, the Birkenwald, the Schneeberg, the Oxenhorn, the Rhethal, and the Behrenkopf, and if we were up a little higher, we could see fifty other peaks, extending clear into the plain of the Palatinate. Within this distance are rocks, ravines, defiles, torrents, and endless forests, and the old woman wanders everywhere through this wilderness. She has a sure foot and a good eye, and can scent you a good league away; so you see we shall have a pretty chase before us." [Pg 273]

"If it were an easy thing to do, I shouldn't have chosen you out of all the people of the Castle."

"That sounds all very well. Still, if we can once get on her trail, I don't deny that with courage and patience—"

"As for her trail, don't worry about that; I will put you on it myself."

"You?"

"Exactly."

"You, able to follow up a trail?"

"Why not?"

"Ah, well, since you are so confident and know so much more about it than I do, that's another thing; go ahead. I'll follow." [Pg 274]

It was easy to see that the old huntsman was vexed at my venturing to encroach upon his particular field of operations. Therefore, laughing inwardly, I waited for no second invitation and turned to the left, sure of coming upon the traces of the old woman, who, after having left the Count in the subterranean passage, must have recrossed the plain to gain the mountain.

Sperver followed on behind me whistling with assumed indifference, and I could hear him muttering:

"The idea of looking for the she-wolf's tracks in the middle of the plain. Any one should know that she would follow along the edge of the forest, as she always does; but it seems she walks about now with her hands in her pockets, like a well-to-do citizen of Tübingen." [Pg 275]

I turned a deaf ear to all this, and kept on my way. Suddenly he gave an exclamation of surprise, and looking at me sharply:

"Gaston," he said, "you know more than you are willing to admit."

"How do you mean, Gideon?"

"The track that it would have taken me a week to find, you have got at once. There is something behind this."

"Where do you see it, then?"

"Come, don't pretend to be looking at your feet," and pointing to a scarcely perceptible white streak at some distance ahead of us, he said:

"There it is."

He started off at a gallop. I followed him, and a moment later we leaped from our saddles. It was indeed the Black Plague's track. [Pg 276]

"I should like to know," said Sperver, folding his arms, "how the devil that trace came to be here!"

"Don't let that trouble you."

"You're right, Gaston. Don't mind what I say. I talk nonsense sometimes. The principal thing now is to find out where this track leads."

The huntsman knelt on the snow. I was all ears, he all attention.

"It is a fresh track," he said at the first glance; "last night's. As I thought, Gaston, during the Count's last attack the hag was prowling about the Castle."

Then examining it more carefully:

"She passed here at about four o'clock this morning." [Pg 277]

"How do you know that?"

"The track is fresh, but there is sleet around it. Last night at twelve o'clock I went out to lock the doors, and sleet was falling then; there is none on this footprint, and therefore it must have been made since then."

"That is true, Sperver; but it may have been made later, at nine or ten o'clock for instance."

"No; look! It is covered with frost. There is no mist to freeze except at daybreak; the old woman passed here after the sleet and before the frost; that is to say, between three and four this morning."

I was astonished at the accuracy of Sperver's reasoning. He got up, slapping his hands together to shake off the snow, and looking at me thoughtfully, he added, as if speaking to himself: [Pg 278]

"Let us call it, at the latest, five o'clock! It is now twelve, isn't it?"

"Quarter to twelve."

"Very good; the hag has seven hours' start of us. We must follow her step by step wherever she may lead us. On horseback we can come up with her in from one hour to two, and if she is still moving, by seven or eight this evening she ought to be in our clutches. Come on, Gaston; there is no time to lose!"

We started on again, following the traces which led us straight towards the mountain. As we galloped along, Sperver called out:

"If good luck would have it that this cursed Plague had gone into a hole in the rocks somewhere to lie down for an hour or two, we might catch her before nightfall." [Pg 279]

"Let's hope so, Gideon."

"Don't fool yourself that way. The old she-wolf is always moving; she never grows tired; she roams through all the hollow roads of the Black Forest. We mustn't indulge vain hopes. If she should happen to have stopped somewhere along the road, so much the better for us, and if she is still going, we have no reason to be discouraged. Come! hurry along!"

It was a strange occupation; that of a man engaged in hunting down one of his own kind; for, after all, this unfortunate woman was a fellow creature, endowed like us with an immortal soul, and feeling, thinking, and reflecting like ourselves. It is true that perverted instincts had brought her near the level of the wolf, and that some great mystery overhung her destiny. Her prowling life had doubtless obliterated her moral being, and even effaced her human character; but granted all this, it is, nevertheless, an incontrovertible truth that nothing in God's universe gave us the right to exercise over her the despotism of man over the brute creation. [Pg 280]

Notwithstanding, a savage ardor hurried us on in pursuit; for my part, my blood boiled, and I was determined to stop at nothing which would enable me to get this strange being into my power. The wide waste of snow flew past us, and the fragments of crust, thrown up by our horses' hoofs, whizzed past our ears. [Pg 281]

Sperver, sometimes with his head thrown back, and his long mustache blowing in the wind, and always with his gray eye on the trail, reminded me of the famous horsemen of the steppes, whom I had seen passing through Germany in my childhood; his tall, sinewy horse, with full mane and body tapering like a greyhound's, completed the illusion. Lieverlé, in his enthusiasm, bounded sometimes as high as our horses' backs, and I could not help trembling at the thought that, should he come upon the Black Plague, he might tear her to pieces before we could make a movement to prevent him.

The old woman led us a terrible chase; on every hill she had doubled, and at every hillock we found a false scent. [Pg 282]

"It is easy enough along here," said Sperver, "for you can see a long distance ahead, but when we get into the woods, it will be another matter; we shall have to keep our eyes open there. Do you see how the cursed beast has confused her tracks? There she has amused herself sweeping the trail, and from that rising ground that is exposed to the wind she has slipped down to the stream and crept through the cresses to reach the thicket yonder. If it weren't for these two foot-prints, she would have tricked us completely."

We had just reached the border of a fir forest. In these forests, the snow never penetrates between the branches of a tree. It was a difficult way. Sperver dismounted to watch the tracks closer, and placed me on the left, that my shadow might not come between him and the ground. There were large open spots covered with dead leaves and pine-needles, which take no imprint. Thus it was only in the unsheltered places, where the snow lay on the ground, that Sperver could recover the trail. [Pg 283]

It took us an hour to get through this patch of woods. The old poacher gnawed his mustache with vexation, and his long nose almost touched his chin. When I tried to speak, he interrupted me shortly, crying:

"Don't talk; it bothers me!"

At last we descended into a valley to the left, and Gideon, pointing to the she-wolf's steps, running parallel with the edge of the undergrowth, remarked: [Pg 284]

"This is no false sortie; we can follow it confidently.

"How do you know?"

"Because the Black Plague has a habit, whenever she doubles on her tracks, of going three steps to one side, then, retracing them, taking four, five or six in the other direction, and finally jumping into a clear space. But when she thinks she has covered the trail, she strikes out without troubling herself about false scents. Look! what did I tell you? She is burrowing now into the brushwood like a wild boar; it will be easy enough to follow her here. So much for that; and now, let's keep the tracks between us and light a pipe!"

We halted, and the good fellow, whose face was beginning to brighten up, looked at me with enthusiasm, crying: [Pg 285]

"Gaston, this promises to be one of the finest days in my life. If we take the old creature, I will fasten her to the saddle behind me like a bundle of old rags. Only one thing troubles me."

"What's that?"

"Having forgot my horn. I should like to have sounded the return as we were approaching Nideck. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He lighted his stub of a pipe, and we started on again. The track of the she-wolf now led up a wooded slope so steep that we were obliged many times to dismount and lead our horses by the bridle.

"There it goes to the right," said Sperver; "in this direction the mountains go up like the side of a house. One of us may have to lead both horses while the other scrambles along after the trail, and as the devil will have it, it's getting so dark we can't see anything much longer." [Pg 286]

The landscape was at this point assuming a grander aspect. Enormous boulders, covered with icicles, raised one beyond another their angular peaks, like breakers in a sea of snow.

There is nothing that imparts a more melancholy sense to the beholder than a winter scene among these mountains. The irregular line of crests, the dark ravines, the denuded trees and bushes sparkling with a tracery of hoar frost, all assume before your eyes a look of indescribable desolation and still sadness; and the silence, so profound that you can hear a dead leaf rustle on the snow-crust, or a pine-needle swirl from its branch,—this silence oppresses you; it forces upon you the realization of man's littleness in the scale of Nature's vast economy. [Pg 287]

Sometimes we felt a need of speaking, if only to break the stillness:

"Ah, we are getting nearer the end of this business! How beastly cold it is! Lieverlé, what have you got there?" or some like insignificant phrase.

Unfortunately, our horses were beginning to tire; they sank up to their bellies in the snow, and no longer whinnied as they did on setting out. The inextricable defiles of the Black Forest stretched out indefinitely. The old woman loved these solitudes; here she had passed around a deserted charcoal-burner's hut; further on she had torn up the tender roots which overspread the surface of the rocks; and here again she had sat down at the foot of a tree to rest, and that recently,—at most two hours before, for the marks in the snow were fresh. At sight of this, our hopes and enthusiasm were redoubled; but the daylight was fast fading out. Strangely enough, ever since our departure from Nideck, we had met neither woodcutters, charcoal-burners, nor log-haulers; the solitude was as complete as in the Siberian steppes. At five o'clock the night had so far closed in that Sperver halted and said to me: [Pg 288]

"Gaston, we have started a couple of hours too late. The Plague has got too long a start of us. In ten minutes the woods will be as dark as an oven. Our best plan will be to reach the Roche Creuse, twenty minutes from here, light a good fire, and eat our provisions and empty our goat-skins. When the moon comes up we will take up the trail again, and if the old hag is not the devil himself, ten to one we shall come upon her frozen stiff at the foot of some tree, for no human creature could live through such a tramp in such weather as this. Sebalt himself, who is the best walker in all the Black Forest, could not have stood it. What do you say, my boy?" [Pg 289]

"I should be mad to think otherwise, and, moreover, I am perishing with hunger!"

"Well, let's be off!"

He took the lead, and we pressed into a narrow gorge between two walls of precipitous rock. The fir-trees formed an arch above our heads; beneath our feet trickled what the frost had left of a mighty torrent, and from time to time a wandering ray penetrated the obscurity, and reflected the dull, lead-colored ice mantle. The darkness had become such that I deemed it wise to let my bridle fall on the horse's neck. The steps of our horses on the slippery pebbles reëchoed with an odd noise like the laughing and chattering of monkeys through the narrow glen. The rocks took up and repeated every sound, and in the distance a blue point seemed to grow as we advanced. It was the outlet of the gorge. [Pg 290]

"Gaston," said Sperver, "we are now in the bed of the Tunkelbach. It is the wildest pass in all the Black Forest, and it terminates in a cave called La Marmite du Grand Guelard. In the spring, when the snow is melting, the Tunkelbach pours all its torrents into it to a depth of two hundred feet. It makes a tremendous roar; the waters leap over the edge, and their spray falls upon the neighboring mountains. Sometimes they even flood the cavern of the Roche Creuse, but just now it must be as dry as a powder-flask, and we can build a big fire there." [Pg 291]

As I listened to Sperver's observations, I was at the same time considering this ominous defile, and reflecting that the instinct of the savage beasts, which seek such retreats far from the light of day and from all that gladdens the soul, must be akin to remorse. The creatures that live in the sunshine,—the goat on the open crag, the horse running free on the plain, the dog frisking about his master, the bird basking in the sunshine,—all breathe in joy and happiness with their gambols and their songs. The kid, browsing in the shade of the great trees on the green hillside, is as poetic an object as the retreat that he prefers; the wild boar, as fierce and savage as the trackless brakes through which he roams; the eagle as proud and lofty as the towering peaks where he rests in his sweeping flight; the lion as majestic as the mighty arches of his den,—but the wolf, the fox, and the ferret seek the darkness, with fear their only companion; aye, this instinct is closely related to remorse. [Pg 292]

I was still reflecting upon these things and already felt the keen air blowing against my face—for we were approaching the opening of the gorge—when suddenly we perceived a reddish reflection dancing upon the rock a hundred feet above us, turning to purple the dark green of the firs, and making the frost wreaths on the tree trunks glitter. [Pg 293]

"Ha!" whispered Sperver hoarsely, "we've got the witch!"

My heart leaped; we moved along pressed close against each other. The dog growled warningly.

"Can't she escape us?"

"No; she is caught like a rat in a trap. La Marmite du Grand Guelard has but one outlet, and we are barring it. Everywhere else the rocks rise sheer two hundred feet. Ha! you Satan's hag, I've got you!"

He sprang from his horse into the ice-cold water of the Tunkelbach, handing me his bridle. I [Pg 294] shivered. The click of his rifle as he cocked it sounded with fearful distinctness, and the sound sent a nervous wave clear to my finger-tips.

"Sperver, what are you doing?"

"Never fear; it is only to frighten her."

"Very good; but no blood! Remember what I have already told you. The ball that strikes the Plague kills the Count!"

"Rest easy on that score!"

He moved forward, without stopping further to listen to me. I could hear the splash of his feet in the water; then I saw his tall figure appear at the outlet of the glen, black against the bluish background. He stood full five minutes motionless. Meanwhile, I was slowly approaching him, [Pg 295] and when he at last turned around, I was within three paces of him.

"Sh!" he said mysteriously; "look there!"

At the end of the open gorge, now revealed to us, which was dug out like a quarry in the mountainside, I saw a bright fire unrolling its golden spires before the mouth of a cave, and in front of the fire sat a man with his hands clasped about his knees, whom I recognized by his clothing as the Baron Zimmer. He sat motionless, with his eyes fixed on the fire, and seemed lost in thought. Behind him a dark form lay stretched upon the ground, and further in the distance, his horse, half lost in the shadows, gazed upon us with fixed eyes, ears pricked up, and distended nostrils. [Pg 296]

I stood stupefied. How came the Baron Zimmer to be in this dense, terrifying wilderness at such an hour and such a time,—what was he doing here? Had he lost his way? The most contradictory conjectures succeeded each other in my brain, and I knew not where to pause, when the Baron's horse began to neigh. At the sound, the master raised his head:

"Well, Rappel, what now?"

Then, in his turn, he gazed in our direction, straining his eyes to make us out in the darkness. That pale face, with its clear-cut features, delicate lips, and heavy black eyebrows, gathered in a frown, would have struck me with admiration under any other circumstances, but now an indefinable feeling of apprehension took possession of me, and I was filled with vague anxiety. [Pg 297] Suddenly, the young man cried:

"Who goes there?"

"I, monsieur," replied Sperver quickly, at the same time advancing towards him; "I, Sperver, steward of the Count of Nideck!"

A strange expression passed across the Baron's features, but not a muscle of his face quivered. He rose to his feet, gathering the folds of his cloak more closely about him. I drew towards me the horses and the hound, who suddenly began to howl as he had done on the night of my arrival at the Castle.

Who of us is not subject in some degree to superstitious fears? At the sound of Lieverlé's menacing growls, I felt a dread of I know not what, and I shuddered instinctively. Sperver and [Pg 298] the Baron stood at a distance of fifty yards from each other; the first immovable in the middle of the gorge, with his rifle resting against his shoulder; the other, standing erect before the entrance of the cave, holding his head high, and surveying us with a haughty glance.

"What do you want here?" he asked defiantly.

"We are looking for a woman," replied the huntsman; "a woman who comes each year prowling about the Castle of Nideck, and we have orders to seize her."

"Has she robbed?"

"No."

"Has she committed murder?"

"No, monsieur." [Pg 299]

"Then what do you want of her? What right have you to pursue her?"

Sperver straightened up, and fixing his gray eye on the Baron:

"And you? What right have you over her?" he asked with a strange smile; "for she is there. I can see her at the back of the cavern. By whose authority do you meddle with our affairs? Do you not

know that we are at this moment within the domains of Nideck, and that we administer all forms of justice at our pleasure?"

The young man grew paler yet, and replied shortly:

"I am not accountable to you for any act of mine."

"Take care," replied Sperver; "I am acting in the name of my master, the Count of Nideck, and am but doing my duty. You will have to answer for any interference on your part." [Pg 300]

"Your duty!" exclaimed the young man, with a bitter smile; "if you speak of your duty, you may force me to tell you mine."

"Let us hear it," cried the old steward, whose face was becoming discomposed with anger.

"No," returned the Baron, "I will tell you nothing, nor shall you set foot inside this cave."

"We will see about that," said Sperver, advancing towards the cavern.

The young man drew his hunting-knife. Seeing this, I tried to spring between them, when the hound, which I was holding by a leash, shook himself free, throwing me to the ground with the force of the shock. I thought that the Baron was lost; but at the same moment a savage cry rose [Pg 301] from the back of the cavern, and as I rose to my feet, I saw the old woman standing upright before the fire, her clothing in rags, her head run forward, and her gray locks scattered about her shoulders, with her long, skinny arms raised towards heaven, and uttering dismal howls, like the cries of the wolf in the cold winter nights, when hunger is gnawing at his entrails.

Never in my life had I witnessed such a frightful spectacle. Sperver, motionless, with his eyes fixed on the strange scene before him, seemed turned to stone. The dog, surprised himself at this unexpected apparition, stood still for a moment, then suddenly arching his bristling back, he flew at the hag with a low growl of fury that made me shudder. The entrance to the cavern was some [Pg 302] eight or ten feet above the spot where we stood, or he would have reached it with a single bound. I can hear him still, as he crashes through the frost-laden bushes, and see the Baron fling himself before the old woman with the heart-rending cry:

"My mother!"

Then, as the dog takes his final spring, Sperver, quick as lightning, raises his rifle, and brings down the noble animal dead at the young man's feet. All this was the work of an instant. The gorge was momentarily lighted by the rifle flash, and the echoes, taking up the noise of the explosion, carried it roaring and tumbling to the infinite depths of the neighboring crags. [Pg 303]

When the smoke cleared away, I saw Lieverlé lying stretched out at the foot of the rock, and the old woman fainting in the arms of the young man. Sperver eyed the Baron gloomily, as he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, his features working with rage and grief.

"Baron," he said, pointing to the cave, "I have killed my best friend to save the woman whom you call your mother. You may thank God that her destiny was bound up with that of my master. Take her away from here. Take her far away, and let her never return; for, if she does, I cannot answer for myself."

Then, glancing at his dog:

"My poor Lieverlé!" he cried; "was this to be the outcome of our long years of friendship? Come, [Pg 304] Gaston, let us hurry away from this accursed spot. I might do something I should regret afterwards."

Seizing his horse's mane, he started to throw himself into his saddle, but suddenly his heart swelled to bursting, and dropping his head on his horse's neck, he wept like a child. [Pg 305]

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BARON'S STORY.—HE DISAPPEARS.

Sperver set out, carrying the body of Lieverlé in his cloak. I had refused to follow him, for I felt that duty compelled me to remain near this unhappy woman, and I could not have abandoned her without violating my conscience. Moreover, I am obliged to confess I was curious to examine more closely this mysterious being, and hardly had Sperver disappeared in the darkness of the defile before I began climbing the path to the cavern. A strange sight awaited me there. Upon a large fur cloak with green facings lay the old woman in a long purple robe, with a golden arrow [Pg 306] stuck through her gray hair, her withered hands clutching her breast.

Time will never efface the image of this woman from my mind. Her vulture-like face, distorted by the last agonies of death, her staring eyes and half-opened mouth, were appalling to look upon. Such might have been the last hour of the terrible Queen Frédégonde. The Baron, on his knees beside her, tried to restore her to animation, but at the first glance it was evident to me that the unfortunate creature was dying, and it was not without a sentiment of profound pity that I kneeled to raise her arm.

"Leave her alone! How dare you touch her?" cried the young man bitterly. [Pg 307]

"I am a doctor, monsieur."

"Ah, pardon me!"

He was deathly pale, and his lips trembled nervously. After a moment, he asked:

"What is your opinion, monsieur?"

"It is over. She is dead."

Without replying, he leaned back against the wall of the cavern, his forehead resting in his hands, and staring straight before him, motionless as marble. I sat near the fire, watching the flames as they climbed to the arched top of the cave, casting their vivid reflections upon the rigid features of the Black Plague.

We had been sitting thus for a full hour without stirring, when suddenly lifting his head, the Baron said to me: [Pg 308]

"Monsieur, all this confounds me. Here is my mother,—for twenty-six years I thought I knew her, and now a whole world of mystery and horror opens itself before my eyes. You are a doctor; tell me if you have ever known anything like it before."

"Monsieur," I replied, "the Count of Nideck is afflicted with a malady that bears a striking resemblance to that of which your mother has been the victim. If you have confidence enough in me to relate to me the facts which you yourself must have witnessed, I will gladly tell you what I know of the matter, for this exchange may be the means of saving my patient."

As I began to speak the Baron started, and exclaimed:

"What? the Count of Nideck visited thus? This is more than a coincidence." [Pg 309]

And without further parley he informed me that the Baroness Zimmer, belonging to one of the noblest families in Saxony, and being a blood relation of the Count of Nideck (to whom he should have made himself known had not circumstances required that he should maintain the strictest secrecy as to his identity), had been accustomed for many years to make a journey into Italy towards Christmas, accompanied by an old man servant, who alone possessed her entire confidence; that this man, being at the point of death, had desired a private interview with her son, and that at the last hour, tormented no doubt by remorse, he had told the young man that his mother's journey into Italy was only a pretext to furnish her a means of making an excursion [Pg 310] into the Black Forest, of the object of which he himself was in ignorance, but which must have been of some fearful nature, since the Baroness invariably returned haggard, in rags, and almost dead, and that it required weeks of rest to repair the terrible fatigues of these few days.

This is what the old servant had related to the young Baron, thinking that in so doing he was only fulfilling his duty. The son, wishing to learn the truth of his story, whatever the cost to himself, had this very year verified the incomprehensible fact by following his mother first to Baden, and then pursuing her step by step into the gorges of the Black Forest. The tracks which Sebalt had [Pg 311] discovered on the Altenberg were his.

When the Baron had finished his confidence, I thought that I ought no longer to conceal from him the singular influence which the advent of the old woman exercised upon the Count's health, nor indeed any of the attendant circumstances, and accordingly, I imparted to him even the slightest details.

The Baron was amazed by the coincidence of these facts; the mysterious attraction which these two beings exercised over one another without knowing it, the ghastly drama which they had enacted without consciousness, the acquaintance which the old woman had shown with the Castle and its most secret passages, without ever having seen them before; the costume which [Pg 312] she had discovered in which to carry out the murder in pantomime, and which could only have been discovered in some mysterious retreat which magnetic clairvoyance had revealed to her.

When I had ended the recital of my experiences, the Baron relapsed into his former gloomy silence, nor did he again rouse from it while I remained near him. I fancied I could read in his face and attitude the one wish to distance himself forever from the scene of this bitter revelation.

While we were still sitting, each one buried in his own reflections, the darkness of night began to fade. An owl, far off in the shadows, sounded the retreat of darkness with its strange note, like the gurgling of liquid from a bottle. Presently we heard a whinnying in the depths of the defile, [Pg 313] and then, in the first rays of dawn, we saw a sledge approaching, driven by the Baron's servant. It was covered with straw, and upon it rested a litter, on which we laid the body of the old woman.

I mounted my horse, who did not seem sorry to stretch his legs again, having stood half the night in the snow, and I accompanied the sledge as far as the outlet of the glen. There, having gravely saluted one another for the last time, they proceeded in the direction of Hirschland, and I on my way towards the Castle of Nideck.

At nine o'clock I was again in Odile's presence.

"The Plague is dead!" I cried, "and the spell is raised forever from the Castle. Henceforth we may [Pg 314] look for the olden days at Nideck."

And I related the extraordinary experiences of the last twenty-four hours, exulting in our victory over the hag. When I had finished, and recalled to my now happy love her promise of the day before, Odile dropped her eyes, flushed charmingly, and returned the pressure of my hand with averted head. [Pg 315]

"ODILE DROPPED HER EYES."

After some precious moments passed in the indulgence of our new-found happiness, I proceeded to the Count's chamber. I found him in a very satisfactory condition. He was naturally in a state of complete exhaustion after the terrible crises that he had been through, but was entirely himself, and the fever had disappeared the evening before. Everything pointed towards a speedy recovery. [Pg 316] [Pg 317]

"Monsieur," I said, as he greeted me with a warm grasp of my hand, "your restored health is assured, and it is but the matter of a few days when you will be able to indulge in your favorite pastime again."

"I believe you, monsieur! I feel that myself as I have never done before, and I am bound that you shall remain at Nideck and accompany me on my first boar hunt."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, monsieur," I replied. "Though an entire novice in the art, I shall doubtless gain much by employing my powers of observation."

"And furthermore," continued the Count, "your reward for this greatest of all services which you have performed for me shall be whatever you may require that lies within my gift!" [Pg 318]

"Monsieur," I replied, bowing low, "your generosity overwhelms me. However, we will discuss the matter of compensation at a future time, when your strength will better admit of it. At present let me say that the existing state of affairs is an ample reward for anything I may have been able to accomplish in your behalf." And meanwhile I wondered if the Count realized the significance of his promise as I reflected upon the recompense I was presently to seek at his hands.

As his malady left him, I found the master of Nideck a changed man. His features, which had at first aroused only a sentiment of repugnance in me, slowly resumed their natural expression, and became dignified and even handsome. His generosity and kindness exceeded anything I had before experienced, and everything that Knapwurst had declared in his master's favor was realized to the utmost. From liking I grew to loving him, as I felt indeed I must have done if only as the author of Odile's being. [Pg 319]

The fortnight that followed was one of rejoicing throughout Nideck. The Count gained with wonderful rapidity, and for a week past he had moved about the Castle with a buoyancy and contentment of demeanor which only Odile and the old steward could recall having seen in him long years before, ere the dead witch had yet entwined him in the meshes of her baneful spell. [Pg 320]

Even the grim, melancholy Sebalt had become grotesquely gay, and he discontinued his matinal post on the Altenberg, feeling, no doubt, that he had contributed not a little to his master's recovery. As for Sperver, he was radiant, and he would come to my chamber late at night, after I had left Odile, and as we sat over our bottles we would discuss for the fiftieth time the circumstances of my stay within the Castle.

During the earlier stages of the Count's convalescence I repaired each morning to his chamber, where I invariably found Odile arrived before me, and as the Count was fond of reading, which served to wear away the period of his enforced inactivity, Odile and I would share for hours together the reading of "Garin the Lorrainer," which was one of his favorite romances. [Pg 321]

The extent of my contentment may be imagined. Whenever I glanced up from my book as it became necessary to turn a page, I invariably met Odile's eyes fastened upon my face, and speaking the whole language of love and contentment, and when she in turn assumed the reading, I found myself lost in a world of reverie and speculation as I continued to study her beautiful face, which was always a revelation to me, no matter how long it remained before my gaze.

Oh, the delight of all this! How I pity you crabbed misanthropes who know not the richness of a loving woman's endearments!

I had determined, with Odile's sanction, to broach the subject of our betrothal to the Count as soon as his health would permit it. [Pg 322]

Meanwhile, our hours at table were spent in laying plans for our future. I was sanguine of success in my avowal, for added to the Count's desire of seeing his line perpetuated,—which lay nearest his heart,—I knew that he felt, though how deservedly I leave it to the reader to determine, that I had been instrumental in restoring him to health. These considerations,

combined with his invariable desire to secure to his daughter her slightest wish or whim, I believed would be sufficient to ensure the consummation of my desire. Moreover, with my beloved champion beside me, I felt strong enough to overcome the opposition of the universe. [Pg 323]

But the future still held something in store, and as it often happens when we fancy ourselves beyond the reach of an adverse Fate, we may in reality be standing within the shadows of the Valley of Darkness. [Pg 324]

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BOAR HUNT.

"You must be ready to start with the Count in an hour," exclaimed Sperver, as he stood on my threshold before the sun had yet risen. "Sebalt and Becker came in late last night, famished, and covered with mud, and they have reported a wild boar's tracks near the Leidenthal. I will lend you whatever clothes you need, but be quick, for there's only breakfast between us and the start."

I got up, and taking a hasty plunge in the icy water beside my bed, which served to drive the vapors from my brain, I half dressed myself, and followed Sperver to his room. [Pg 325]

"The beaters found game worthy of our powder," continued Gideon. "They brought back a dried clump of bog-mud with an enormous hoof-print in the middle of it. If the Count's carbine misses fire, we must stand in well beside him this time, though he always grudges the fatal shot to any arm but his own."

I paid little heed to his words, busied as I was in accommodating myself to my borrowed garments, and I presently emerged from the chamber dressed in a leather hunting-jacket, cap, and long gaiters which reached to my hips; a carbine and long hunting-knife completed my outfit.

"If I only had you for a couple of weeks on the forest patrol, I would make a first-class shot out of you," said Sperver with a grin. "As it is, I suppose you know as much about a gun as a pike does of mountain climbing." [Pg 326]

"Just about!" I laughed. "However, I'm fortunately in such good company that it will make little difference whether I can tell the muzzle from the stock, or not."

"There's something in that," he returned; "and as there are to be ladies in the party you may find other employment as agreeable as the killing of animals," and he looked at me with a dry twitching of his mouth.

I made no reply to this beyond rather a grim smile, and a moment later we reached the dining-room. I found the Count dressed in hunting-costume, seated at the table, on which Tobias was placing the last dishes for the breakfast. He complimented me on my professional appearance, and added that, judging from externals, a little practice was all that was necessary to make me an accomplished huntsman. [Pg 327]

I looked in vain for Odile as I entered the room, but she presently appeared in a close-fitting habit which became her marvellously well, sparkling with health and freshness, and bearing in one hand her long skirt, and in the other a pearl-handled crop. A pistol with a heavy barrel was thrust beneath her belt, more for ornament, I fancied, than for service.

"Ha! Odile!" cried her father, as she greeted us and took her seat at the table, "the mere sight of your rosy cheeks and lithe step puts new life into me! It's a pleasure to look at you. Isn't it so, Monsieur Gaston?" then, as Odile grew crimson with confusion, the Count perceived his blunder, and began to busy himself with the dishes before him. The next moment I caught Odile's eye, as she stole an amused glance at me, and I nodded a quick affirmative, without violence to my conscience. [Pg 328]

The meal passed with narratives of hunting exploits by the Count, who delighted in recalling his past experiences, often discontinuing his meal to illustrate by attitudes and gestures his combats with the different animals of the regions round about. Odile and I proved good listeners, though, perhaps, as one sometimes hearkens to a strain of music, the better to indulge his own reflections. [Pg 329]

Breakfast finished, we went down into the courtyard. A dozen horses stood saddled just inside the principal gate. Sebalt, in his leather dress, with his double-coiled horn strapped across his back, and a heavy cowhide whip in his hand ready to strike, held a score of dogs in leash, that were baying and tugging at their bonds in excited anticipation of the part they were to play in the day's sport. Joy gleamed in every line of his goat's face as his long deferred desire was now about to be realized. Gideon, who held the Count's horse, looked more himself than I had seen him since the death of poor Lieverlé; he seemed to have recovered much of his wonted good spirits.

I pushed aside the groom who stood beside Odile's horse, and she sprang from my hand into the saddle. Then I, in turn, mounted my horse, and moved abreast of Odile and the Count. [Pg 330]

When all was in readiness, Sebalt raised his horn and sounded the departure as, according to

Sperver, he alone could sound it.

The neighboring hillsides took up the sound, and threw it back in tones of purest silver, and all the echoes of the valleys were awakened and fled away towards the rising sun. This warm February sun had done its work, and the snow had disappeared to a level of but a few inches, covered with a hard crust. We started off at a gallop. Sebalt and Sperver rode first, with Odile, the Count, and myself close behind them. Becker and the under-keepers came on in the rear. [Pg 331]

Sebalt led the pack along the base of the Gaisenberg, and skirting the falls of the Lauterbach, he followed along the defile at its further side, from which point the trail diverged in the direction of the Leidenthal. The weather was superb, not a cloud in the heavens, and the frosty air clear as crystal. The bare oaks creaked their gaunt branches, and the singing pines waved their lofty tops in the fresh south wind. The yelping of the pack could have been heard for a mile around, and Gideon, turning from time to time, called to them:

"Hold your noise, you rascals; you'll have reason enough to howl before long, I'll warrant."

There was little chance for conversation at the furious pace which we were following, and I contented myself with frequent glances at Odile, whose superb beauty was enhanced by the bright color in her cheeks, which excitement, exercise and happiness called forth. As for the Count, I could no longer recognize in him the dying patient of my first night at Nideck. All trace of his terrible illness had vanished, and he rode like a youth of twenty years, vigorous, calm, confident. [Pg 332]

At the end of an hour we emerged from the defile into the dazzling sunlight beyond. The dogs came upon the trail of the boar, and their long, full cries changed to exultant yappings; they glided along to right and left among the rocks, their noses to the ground, and they ran and leaped along the trail. Not one of them followed the other's lead, until he had verified the scent for himself; like all true hunting dogs, they relied only upon themselves. [Pg 333]

Meanwhile, the blast of the horn, the short, savage yelps of the pack, and the noise of our horses' hoofs as they pierced the sparkling snow crust, made music of an exciting, bewildering sort. I galloped on imbued to the finger-tips with the contagious anticipation everywhere around me.

For some little time past the order of the hunt had been broken up. The Count, seemingly lost in the one object of the chase and oblivious to all else, had ridden far ahead, and had almost overtaken Sebalt and Sperver, who were at such a distance from us that the sound of their trumpets grew feebler and feebler, and at length were entirely lost, save that at rare intervals they reached our ears like the sigh of the passing breeze. The mounts of Becker and his comrades, though chosen for endurance and strength, were not the equal of ours in speed; and thus it was that Odile and I now found ourselves alone, as it were, midway in the plain. [Pg 334]

On we went. Every now and then Odile would turn her head and smile at me; then she would whisper to her horse, and we bounded along yet faster. From the less frequent pauses of the pack, that glided, no larger than rabbits now, up the distant slopes, and their straight-ahead course, I fancied that the foremost of the party were approaching the whereabouts of the game. [Pg 335]

It was now that a belt of dense woods became visible on the rising ground before us. The Count had by this time gained so far upon us that we presently saw him disappear, together with his followers, within its borders.

"We must be in at the death!" cried Odile breathlessly; "let's make haste!" and she urged her horse still further, while I clapped spurs to mine. Twenty minutes later we had covered the intervening distance, and dashed into the shadows of the wood.

We had not proceeded above a mile further, when we found that our road forked, and running over an extensive ledge of rock, swept bare of snow and pine-needles by the wind, we were at a loss which path to follow, for there were no tracks of horses nor dogs, and the direction of both paths being apparently the same, the noise of the pack growing momentarily fainter, afforded us no clue to our proper course. [Pg 336]

We reined up, impatient at this vexatious occurrence.

"Which way now?" I cried to Odile.

She hesitated for a moment.

"Let's go to the right!" she replied. "There's a new blaze on that beech-tree yonder. Perhaps one of the men's guns bruised the bark as he passed it!" and without waiting for me to reply, she started on again.

It occurred to me a few moments later that we might now be left entirely alone if, perchance, we had chosen the wrong path, and if our followers, who would inevitably meet with the same question of direction on reaching the fork in the road, should decide upon the one to the left. [Pg 337]

I felt little apprehension in being thus deserted, as it were, but let it not be understood by this that fearlessness formed any part of my character; it was to the more ignoble trait of ignorance that my present equanimity was due. I did, however, feel that Odile should be reminded of the fact, and I proceeded to communicate it to her; but whether it was that her attention was so much engrossed by the business in hand that she had no thought for anything else, or whether she considered my apprehensions groundless, her only reply was a smile and a motion of her

head, as her horse carried her away from me, which I interpreted as meant to reassure me, and I gave my horse his head. [Pg 338]

From time to time we heard, far over on the mountainside, the sound of the woodcutter's axe, falling against the oak with measured stroke,—that slow, heavy stroke that is taken up and exaggerated by the echoes,—then the creaking of the falling tree, the shout of warning, and the thud of the giant as it measured its length upon the earth, crashing among the underbrush. Owing to the frequent windings of the woodland path, and the uncertain character of the ground, we were obliged to moderate our speed, and as we came upon the open land between the hills, the barking of the dogs reached us, loud for a moment, then faint again, as some intervening object came between us. [Pg 339]

"You hear the dogs!" cried Odile; "we are on the right path after all!"

And as the sounds became more distinct with each moment, I was satisfied that she was right.

Here and there, as we entered a dark defile, we saw the fire of the charcoal-burner beneath the shadowy boughs, spreading its purple ring over the snow-crust and even to the tops of the swaying firs, then drawing its uncertain rays the closer until it was no longer but a spark, only to spread them out again yet wider than before. The outline of the charcoal-burner, stooping over the flame, with his broad-brimmed hat flattened on his shoulders, smoking his short, black pipe, and turning potatoes in the embers, reminded me at a distance of the trolls that are said to quarry gems of untold value in the centre of the earth. [Pg 340]

The noise of the dogs, forming a discordant, frenzied concert, grew nearer every moment. At length a sharp turn to the left, as we emerged from the deep, narrow glen which we had been traversing for some minutes past, brought us, it almost seemed, right upon the game, so startling was the uproar that greeted us.

I was now convinced that we had happened upon the right path, and I expected momentarily to come upon the Count's party engaged in securing the game. I glanced back to see if Becker and his comrades were near us, but our frequent windings through the forest would have concealed them completely from our view, even had they followed us. [Pg 341]

Up to this point I had been vaguely regretting my inexperience in the hunt, though I still had little realization of the danger that might threaten us. But now, as I heard the loud blare of Sebalt's horn not above a quarter of a mile before us, I felt entirely reassured, and both Odile and I were looking expectantly for the forms of the Count and his huntsmen among the trees.

A few rods further on we came upon a brake, half swamp, half stubble, beyond which, as far as the eye could reach, the sun once more shone brightly. We advanced at a walk, which the treacherous nature of the ground made necessary. The din of the maddened dogs, and a strange, ominous snarl, the like of which I had never before heard, told us that the beast was run, or nearly run, to earth. [Pg 342]

"Whose hand will the slaying fall to to-day?" I exclaimed laughingly to Odile.

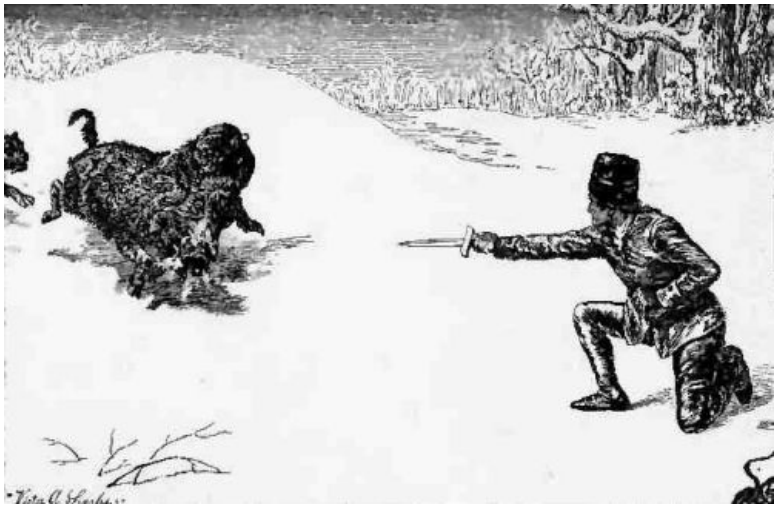
"To my father's, if his aim is true," replied Odile excitedly.

She had hardly finished these words when a sudden parting of the bushes before us brought us into a crescent-shaped clearing some fifty yards in extent, and entered at its opposite side by the other forest path. Directly in the centre of this clearing, surrounded by a score of dogs that had seized him by the ears and neck, and were vainly endeavoring to bear him down, regardless of those of their number who had succumbed to his savage tusks,—was a huge wild boar!

I confess to a sensation of horror at the sight. I glanced involuntarily at Odile, whom I would have given anything in the gift of man to see removed as far as possible from the spot. She, apparently undaunted still, though with a shade less color in her fair cheeks, turned hastily towards me and motioned me to hand her my rifle. I complied with misgiving, silently cursing my ignorance of the weapon's use, and in another moment Odile was gazing along its glistening barrel. [Pg 343]

There was a report, and though the aim was true it failed of its effect. And now the raging brute, infuriated by the pain of the wound, charged directly upon Odile, heedless of the sharp fangs which lacerated him, unchecked by the combined strength of the pack.

My dismay was complete when, the next moment, the frightened animal which Odile rode, rearing up at the boar's furious onslaught, lost its footing in the treacherous bog-land and fell on its side,—happily upon its right side. [Pg 344]



"I FELL UPON MY KNEE BEFORE THE BRUTE."

Leaping to the ground, I had only time to seize my love about the waist and swing her beyond the reach of the horse's flying hoofs, when the boar was upon me. There was no time for reflection. I fell upon my knees before the brute, my hunting-knife extended straight before me, and held with all the strength of my arm. [Pg 345]

So quickly works the eye sometimes, in moments of danger, that in this instant I saw the Count, or rather, perhaps, he came within my range of vision, pale as death, and riding at the highest speed along the opposite path, while close behind him followed Gideon and Kraft. [Pg 346]

The knife in my hand never swerved, for the love I bore Odile steadied my arm as I fancy that alone could have done. The mad rush of the boar was but the means of his surer destruction. He came straight upon the knife, and the momentum of his ponderous body drove the steel deep through his heart. I felt the gush of his life's blood pour over my arm and chest; then I heard a cry from Odile's lips and a shout of wild triumph from the Count and his huntsmen; then I fell backwards, my consciousness half crushed out by the enormous weight of the brute's body as it struck against me in its swaying fall to the earth. [Pg 347]

A moment later Odile, oblivious to all around her, had thrown herself into my arms and burst into uncontrollable tears. The crisis of the moment just passed had completely unnerved her and robbed her of her usual calm control. [Pg 348]

We stood thus when the Count reined up before us.

"Ha! is it so?" he exclaimed, endeavoring to hide his emotion beneath a joking exterior. "And why not? Who deserves better of a woman than the lad who has saved her life and her father's too!" And as Sebalt and Gideon rode up, all three jumped from their saddles and wrung my hands, while good old Sperver beamed with gratified pride, and pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes to screen them from the glare of the sun. [Pg 349]

These words of the Count had filled our cup of happiness to the brim. Though I had dared to hope for little exception on his part when I should determine to impart to him my wishes, yet this complete and cordial acceptance of the relationship existing between Odile and myself filled me with unwonted exultation. Nor was the Count's satisfaction any less, I believe, as he realized that the fulfilment of that desire which lay nearest his heart was now assured him. It seemed, moreover, that he had guessed something of the truth during the hours which we had passed together in his sick-room.

"Aye," said he, in speaking of it afterwards, "did you think I had not weighed my words, Gaston, when I promised you any reward you should require of me? And was I wrong in believing that such a spirited lad as you, and one after my own heart, might find his happiness in Odile; for she is lovely, is she not, though she is my child?" [Pg 350]

For all answer, I drew Odile closer to me, and kissed the fair face that rested on my shoulder. [Pg 351]

CHAPTER XV.

THE BANQUET.—THE DWARF EXPLAINS THE MYSTERY OF THE NIDECK HOUSE.

The body of the boar was strapped across the backs of the two horses which the beaters, Wilhelm Mölz and Yeri Scharf, relinquished for the purpose, themselves returning on foot to the Castle.

I looked with strange fascination at the shaggy brute that had so nearly put an end to all my cherished prospects. The bristling, wiry hair running over head and shoulders and extending half-way to the haunches; the broad yellow tusks that forced up the black, leathery upper lip; the [Pg 352]

small, savage eyes now glazed and half-closed in death, all inspired me with reluctant curiosity and loathing.

We retraced our road to the Castle, walking our jaded mounts. The dogs followed close behind us, their tongues lolling from their mouths, and eyeing at intervals their fallen foe, as if not yet sure that he was beyond renewing the combat.

As we reached the eventful fork in the forest path, the Count drew up:

"Here's where you went astray," he said; "you didn't see the bit of red flannel, torn from the lining of Sebalt's jacket, that we pinned to the tree, just here, within the left-hand path? By Jove, [Pg 353] it's gone! This stiff breeze must have drawn it against the knife's edge and cut it through. Look! There it is, caught in the thicket."

Sure enough, a long strip of red flannel was fluttering in the twigs of the underbrush a few feet away.

"I shudder when I think how we might be returning now!" exclaimed the Count, and a look of gloom settled for a moment upon his face.

Gideon rode up to the tree, and pulling out his hunting-knife, restored it to his belt. We looked thoughtfully along the fateful path for several minutes still. Then we resumed our homeward course.

It was towards two o'clock when we trooped into the courtyard. We presented a somewhat less spirited appearance than at our setting out at daybreak, but we were victorious and happy, [Pg 354] nevertheless.

While the huntsmen and hostlers were busy in removing the boar and caring for the dogs and horses, the Count continued to the lodge gate, and Odile and I followed him leisurely, along the rugged path.

As we passed the lodge room, wherein we could descry the dwarf and a half-dozen other figures seated about the fireplace, Offenloch stepped out, and bowing to the Count, he said:

"Some musicians from the Forest, monsieur! They ask permission to play in the Castle this evening in return for food and a night's lodging."

"Good!" said the Count; "music is just what we want, and such as these fellows play! For I was [Pg 355] just sending for you, Offenloch, to bid you prepare a feast to-night worthy of the triple event to be celebrated. Tell all the people of the Castle to be present in the dining-room at eight o'clock, and see that no one of them all is missing. These players shall furnish us music. Let nothing be wanting to every one's pleasure."

The delighted butler smiled expectantly, and withdrew to carry out his master's instructions.

We continued to the drawing-room, where we took leave of one another to prepare for the evening's festivities. A few minutes later I found myself in my chamber. I was pretty thoroughly used up with the unusual experiences of the morning, and throwing off my borrowed clothes, I [Pg 356] lay down on my bed, where I presently fell into a leaden slumber.

I woke some hours later, much refreshed, to find the sun set and my tower chamber dark. After five minutes of yawning and stretching, I got up, and striking a light, I set about to prepare myself for the feast.

Meanwhile I reflected—in that state of complete happiness which life cannot offer twice, and which it does not often fall to our lot that first time to embrace—upon the circumstances of my present. It seemed like the touch of the genie's hand that I should now find myself installed for all time at Nideck, the accepted lover of its mistress, and beloved by its master, the Count.

I was still reflecting in this wise as I went down the stairs to the dining-room. I found a gay [Pg 357] company assembled there. Many of the faces were new to me, as I had never penetrated to the remoter parts of the Castle; but all were gay and laughing, and bespoke impatient expectation of the amusement in store for them. The arrangements for the repast were elaborate and complete, and worthy of their projector, Offenloch.

Hardly had the members of the household finished greeting me, when Odile appeared on the Count's arm, her exquisite beauty well set off by a rich gown of black brocade that made her complexion dazzling by contrast, and in her hair a single band of jewels.

They proceeded to the head of the table, and the Count motioned me to him. Then, with Odile on [Pg 358] his right hand and I at his left, he addressed the gathering:

"My friends," said he, "you shall now know the purpose of your being called hither to-night. It is to celebrate the greatest of all events in the lives of three of us; namely, the saving of your mistress's life this morning, as you have doubtless already heard, and the restoration of your master's health, both the work of Monsieur de la Roche beside me here" (I experienced much more embarrassment than gratification at this unexpected eulogy), "and lastly, that which is fraught with like significance for us all, the betrothal of your mistress and our benefactor!"

At this point the Count was interrupted by a chorus of cheers that were prolonged for several [Pg 359] moments. As the noise subsided he went on:

"It is well known to you all how dear to me the thought has been of feeling that the ancient line of Nideck, which has held an honorable place in the history of Alsace for many centuries, should continue to flourish long after I, Count Hermann, shall have passed away. That time is not far distant, and when it comes it rejoices me to think that I shall hand over to these young people beside me here the future of my race. Your young master has endeared himself already to your hearts, and he will continue to do so during the years which are to come. Your devotion to me in the past has been complete, and the memory of it is one of the proudest of my possessions; and now I ask you to extend this devotion to those who shall succeed me when I in turn pass on the [Pg 360] Castle and its lands. And now but one more word. This night shall be devoted to revelry, and there should be no downcast eye among us! He who rejoices most shall best prove his loyalty to his house. Eat, drink, and be merry! The Count of Nideck requires it of you!"

He paused, and a chorus of shouts greeted his message of good-will. The old housekeeper wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron, while some of the younger maids were reduced even to whimpering; the men maintained a sturdy silence, but it was evident that all, especially the old steward, the dwarf, and the master of the hounds, were no less affected than the women. [Pg 361]

Ere we resumed our seats, the ancient wassail-bowl of the Nidecks, blackened by centuries past, was filled to overflowing with sparkling wine from the Drachenfels, and went the round of the table, each one draining all he could at a breath. The generous draught served to increase the already growing hilarity. The happy eyes and faces sparkled more brightly under its magic spell. Then, in response to a signal from the Count, we seated ourselves about the board.

The table fairly groaned beneath its burden of dishes ranged everywhere with lavish profusion. Bottles of all shapes and sizes, cobwebbed and redolent of the Castle's earthen vaults, were dotted all about, with glasses of as various patterns beside them, and long-stemmed pipes lay [Pg 362] beside the plate of each smoker, while an army of small dishes, the contents of which I could not even guess, were ranged the length of the board. Directly in the centre of it all, in an enormous platter of flowered china, rested the head of the ill-favored boar, swimming in a lake of white wine sauce.

The meal progressed; the merriment increased. To-night there was license everywhere, and each one enjoyed himself after his own manner. Healths were emptied with marvellous rapidity till I felt my head reeling with the fumes of the wine and the intoxication of happiness.

An hour passed. The Count, Odile, and I, were toasted at intervals of every few minutes. I wondered how long this state of things could continue successfully. I looked about me. [Pg 363]

There was Sperver, a little distance down the table, with his thin forehead and bristling gray head, his eyes shining and his mustache wet with wine; at his right sat Knapwurst and on his left Marie Lagoutte. His cheeks were a good deal flushed, and on his breast sparkled the badge of his office; it was a pleasure to see his honest, happy face. Marie Lagoutte was even more loquacious than was her wont; her large, cotton cap was pushed very much to one side, and she drank first with one and then with another with the greatest impartiality.

Knapwurst, squatting in his armchair, his head on a level with Sperver's elbow, looked like an enormous cabbage. Then came Tobias Offenloch, so red that he looked as though he had dipped [Pg 364] his face in the wine before him. His wig rested against the chair-back, and his wooden leg was stuck straight out before him under the table. Further on, Sebalt's long, melancholy face stood out in grotesque relief, smiling faintly into his glass.

There were, besides the musicians, the serving-men and women, domestics and hangers-on,—all that little world, in short, which lives and flourishes around great families as the moss, the ivy, and the convolvulus cling about the forest oak. Their eyes were moist with wine-begotten tears. The Vine of Bacchus wept freely everywhere. The light of the great bronze lamp shed over all its beautiful amber tint and left in the shadows the old gray walls where hung in wreaths the [Pg 365] trumpets, bugles, and horns of the former lords of the Castle. The scene was like a glimpse from ages past.

The roof rang with songs and shouts, and ballads long lain dormant in the minds of the singers now came forth and woke the startled echoes of the Castle.

For my part, I did little else but listen and occupy myself with the faces about me; for thanks to the exercise of the morning and my long inhaling of the old wine, smelling of vervain and cypress, that mounted to my brain, and clothed all things for me in vague, unreal beauty, I was in that wholly receptive mood which disaffects even the semblance of effort. [Pg 366]

So I listened with entire complacency to the singularly successful efforts of the entertainers, who were elated to an unusual degree by every circumstance of the occasion.

The evening wore on. The boar's head had disappeared; the array of small dishes was reduced to a mass of indistinguishable débris; one set of bottles had been emptied and replaced by another, and our pipe-bowls were aglow.

At this point the Count suggested that we should have music. The musicians, having enjoyed their fill of food and wine, and burned out a generous pipe, hastened to comply.

Taking up their instruments, they moved over before the hearth, where seats had been arranged for them in the form of a semicircle. They seated themselves, and began to put their instruments [Pg 367] in tune.

It was a picturesque sight, these sons of the Black Forest seated in the dim light of the hall,—the old harper, bent with years, leaning over his instrument; next him a short, thick-set fellow, whom his comrades called Black Pierre, passively supporting his 'cello, and gazing about him curiously at the unfamiliar objects in the room; at his side the handsome, jovial-looking flute player, a picture of rugged health and careless good humor; while next in line came a man of medium stature, whose indistinctive features were rendered more so by the large creases in his cheeks, made by supporting his violin, which he held firmly beneath his square chin, while he tightened [Pg 368] the horse-hair of his bow; and finally, to complete the semicircle, the clarinet player, a slight, sunburned boy, scarce turned eighteen, unmistakably a member of one of those numerous Gypsy bands whose camps are always to be found in the plateau of the Rothalps between Alsace and Lorraine.

The music began, and in justice to the vagabond players it must be said that it was of no ordinary degree of excellence. All the fire and pathos of their lawless natures was blended in the melody; now low and sad and tender as the reveries of old age itself; then rising and swelling into a burst of passion and longing that bewildered and electrified you; then in the midst of all this followed a lively measure, persuasive and careless, that in turn gave way to a waltz, foolish, palpitating, [Pg 369] wanton.

I sat enchanted, my eyes roving over the faces of those around me. Odile, too, seemed to find the strains a fitting accompaniment to her thoughts, for she nodded approvingly at me from time to time, and once I thought I saw a tear hang on her eyelash. However, that may have been mere imagination, as I invariably become sentimental with my third bottle.

After a little the music began again. This time it was Schiller's "Brigands," and this more ambitious undertaking was rendered with a spirit and understanding hardly to be looked for in those who rarely aspired higher than the audiences of the inns, or the woodcutter's gatherings in [Pg 370] the shambles of the forest.

I glanced once more about me. Everyone's eyes were fastened on the flooring. Even the frowzy scullion, who winced as he became conscious of my gaze, and passed the back of his hand across his nose apologetically, seemed lifted for the moment from his pots and kettles to loftier thoughts. Other pieces followed; there were those to suit every mood and fancy. The Count was enthusiastic in his applause at the end of each number, and demanded more, while the others expressed their satisfaction with clapping and stamps on the stone floor.

When at last the music came to an end, the players were rewarded with generous gold pieces by the master, and returned well satisfied to the table to wear away what little was left of the night, [Pg 371] in wine and conversation.

The hour was late. The old clock ticked on in the chimney-corner, and groaned in its casing as its heavy weights ran out their length. The fire fell on the hearth; the great yule logs of the early evening had given out their substance, and now were crumbling away into ruddy embers and soft, flaky ashes. And still the merriment continued, still glasses were filled and drained, and still the call for songs and stories went on.

At length, at that hour when fatigue begins to assert itself over inclination, when vitality is low, and the shadows become deeper, colder, and the night more mysterious, then it was that the Count exclaimed: [Pg 372]

"Each one shall sing a final song except Knapwurst, for he has a voice like a bull-frog, but he is first in story-telling in all Alsace! When it comes his turn he shall tell us a story. Sperver, you shall begin with the song of Black Hatto the Burgrave!

"I am the king of these mountains of mine."

And the steward, rising and standing like the figure of the wild huntsman in the heather, thundered forth the song with wonderful effect. The entire room joined in the chorus, and the old suits of mail fairly creaked and trembled with the sound.

"Bravo!" cried the Count. "Nobly done, Sperver! It is your turn now, Becker! Sing what you like!"

Becker, whose arm had stolen unperceived around Gretchen's waist, got up hastily, in some [Pg 373] embarrassment, and steadying himself against the table, complied with a species of madrigal, proclaiming the virtues of lasses of the present, and claiming in a loud refrain that they were quite the equal of those of the olden times. And in truth they were, judging from the fair faces at intervals about the board, sitting with their eyes veiled by long, drooping lashes, as sleep and the wine were now stealing over them. The kennel-keeper's tribute to their charms served to arouse them, however, and they stole shy and gratified glances at each other as he sang.

After Becker, the Gypsy youth followed with a herdsman's jodel, and so the round was gradually completed. [Pg 374]

The clock struck two from its niche in the corner. The last embers flared up and fell. The lamp burned low.

"A story from Knapwurst now!" exclaimed the Count; "and then the day is done!"

A complete silence succeeded; Knapwurst's quaint relations were favorites, it seemed.

The dwarf, half-tipsy as a result of his liberal potations, rested his elbows on the table, and with

his fists dug into his hollow cheeks, and his eyes staring out of his head, he began in a harsh, monotonous voice:

"Bernhard Hertzog relates that the Burgrave Hugh, surnamed the Wolf, the founder of Nideck, having become old, used to cover his head with a sort of hood that fell down about his shoulders, [Pg 375] which he wore over his steel helmet when engaged in combat; when he wished to breathe more easily, he removed the helmet and covered his head with the hood alone, the scallops of which hung down about his waist. Up to the age of eighty-two, Hugh still wore his armor, though he could hardly breathe in it. Then he sent for Otto of Burlach, his chaplain; Hugh, his eldest son; Berthold, his second son; and his daughter, Bertha, of the red hair, the wife of a Saxon chief named Zaan, and said to them, 'Your mother, the she-wolf, has bequeathed to you her claws; her blood is mixed with mine, and it will be born again among you from century to century, and weep among the snows of the Black Forest. Some will say, 'It is the moaning of the wind!' Others, [Pg 376] 'Hark! The owl hoots!' But it is your blood, mine, and the blood of the she-wolf who made me to murder Elfreda, my first wife before God and the Holy Church! Yes, she has perished by my hand. Cursed be the she-wolf, for it is written, 'I will visit the crime of the father upon the children, unto the third and fourth generations;' aye, until justice be done.' And old Hugh died. From that day the north wind has sobbed, and the owl has hooted, and the lost traveller by night knows not that it is the blood of the she-wolf bemoaning her crime. 'And she will bemoan it,' says Hertzog, 'from century to century, until that day when Hugh's first wife, Elfreda, shall reappear in the form of an angel at Nideck, to pardon and console.'" [Pg 377]

The dwarf paused, and silence succeeded, which lasted for a full minute; then he continued, with drunken gravity, pointing his long forefinger at Odile:

"There is she who was to return to pardon and console. She has returned. At this moment she is sitting beside the Count, our master! Look, sirs! Do you not recognize her? Is it not she? Henceforth the lords of Nideck may rest in peace, for justice is done, and the good angel of this noble house has returned."

THE END.

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