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THE CASTLE OF EHRENSTEIN BY G. P. R. JAMES.
IN ONE VOLUME.

THE

CASTLE OF EHRENSTEIN;

ITS LORDS

SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL;

ITS INHABITANTS

EARTHLY AND UNEARTHLY.

BY

G. P. R. JAMES.

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LEIPZIG

BERNH. TAUCHNITZ JUN.

1847.

EHRENSTEIN.

CHAPTER I.

It was an awfully dark and tempestuous night; the wind howled in fury through the trees, and round the towers; the large drops of rain dashed against the casements, the small lozenges of glass rattled and clattered in their leaden frames, and the thick boards of the oaken floor heaved and shivered under the force of the tempest. From time to time a keen blue streak of lightning crossed the descending deluge, and for an instant the great black masses of the forest, and the high and broken rocks around, appeared like spectres of a gone-by world, and sank into Egyptian darkness again, almost as soon as seen; and then the roar of the thunder was added to the scream of the blast, seeming to shake the whole building to its foundation.

In the midst of this storm, and towards one o'clock in the morning, a young man, of about one-and-twenty years of age, took his way silently, and with a stealthy step, through the large old halls and long passages of the castle of Ehrenstein. His dress was that of one moving in the higher ranks of society, but poor for his class; and though the times were unusually peaceful, he wore a heavy sword by his side, and a poniard hanging by a ring from his girdle. Gracefully yet powerfully formed, his frame afforded the promise of great future strength, and his face, frank and handsome without being strictly beautiful, owed perhaps more to the expression than to the features. He carried a small brazen lamp in his hand, and seemed bound upon some grave and important errand, for his countenance was serious and thoughtful, his eyes generally bent down, and his step quick, although, as we have said, light and cautious.

The room that he quitted was high up in the building, and, descending by a narrow and steep staircase, formed of large square blocks of oak, with nothing but a rope to steady the steps, he entered a long wide corridor below, flanked on one side by tall windows like those of a church, and on the other by numerous small doors. The darkness was so profound that, at first, the rays of the lamp only served to dissipate the obscurity immediately around it, while the rest of the

corridor beyond looked like the mouth of a yawning interminable vault, filled with gloom and shadows. The next moment, however, as he advanced, a blazing sheet of electric flame glanced over the windows, displaying their long line upon the right, and the whole interior of the corridor. Here and there an old suit of armour caught the light, and the grotesque figures on two large antique stone benches seemed to grin and gibber in the flame. Still the young man walked on, pausing only for one moment at a door on the left, and looking up at it with a smile somewhat melancholy.

At the end of the corridor, on the left, he came to a larger staircase than that which he had before descended, and going cautiously down, and through some other passages, he found himself in a small vestibule, with two doors on either hand. They were of various dimensions, but all studded with large nails, and secured by thick bands of iron; and turning to the largest of the four, he quietly lifted the latch, and pushed it open. The wind, as he did so, had nearly blown out the lamp, and in suddenly shading it with his hand, he let slip the ponderous mass of woodwork, which was blown back against its lintels with a dull clang, which echoed far away through the vaulted passages of the castle.

The young man paused and listened, apparently fearful that his proceedings might be noticed; but then, as all was silent till a loud peal of thunder again shook the ear of night, he opened the door once more, carefully shading the lamp with his cloak. Then, closing the door gently behind him, he turned a large key that was in the lock, seemingly to ensure that he should not be followed. He was now in a vast old hall, which seemed to have been long unused, for there were manifold green stains upon the stone pavement, no customary rushes strewn the floor, no benches stood at the sides, and the table, at which many a merry meal had passed, was no longer to be seen. A number of torn and dusty banners and pennons, on the lances which had borne them to the field, waved overhead, as the wind, which found its way through many a broken lozenge in the casements, played amongst these shreds of departed glories. A whispering sound came from them likewise, and to an imaginative mind like that of the youth who walked on beneath them, some of the rustling banners seemed to ask, "Whither, whither?" and others to answer, "To dust, to dust."

In the middle of the hall he paused and thought. A degree of hesitation appeared to come over him; and then, murmuring "It must be all nonsense; but, true or not, I have promised, and I will go," he walked forward to another door at the far end of the hall, much smaller than that by which he had entered. Apparently, it had not been opened for a long time, as a pile of dust lay thick, against it. There was no key in the lock, and it seemed fastened from the other side. After pushing it, however, to see if it would give way, the young man drew forth a key, saying to himself, "Perhaps this opens all," and applying it, after some examination of the key-hole, he turned it, and threw back the door. Then holding up the lamp ere he entered, he gazed into the space before him. It was a low narrow passage in the stone-work, with no windows, or even loopholes, perceptible; but yet the damp found its way in, for the walls were glistening all over with unwholesome slime. The pavement, too, if pavement indeed there was at all, was covered thickly with a coating of black mould, from which, every here and there, sprang up a crop of pale sickly fungi covered with noxious dew, spreading a sort of faint, unpleasant, odour around.

So foul, and damp, and gloomy looked the place, that it evidently required an effort of resolution on the young man's part to enter; but after pausing for a moment he did so, and closed and locked the door behind him; then turning round, he looked on, still holding up the lamp, as if he expected to see some fearful object in the way: all was vacant, however, and as the faint rays of light dispersed the darkness, he could perceive another door at the end of the passage, some twenty yards in advance. It, when he reached it, was found unfastened, and on drawing it back--for it opened inwards--the top of a flight of stone steps was before him, descending, apparently, into a well.

It was no faint heart that beat within his bosom, but those were days in which existed a belief almost universal in things which our more material times reject as visionary; or which, at least, are only credited by a few, who can see no reason why, in the scheme of creation, there should not be means of communication between the spiritual and the corporeal, or why the bond of mortal life once dissolved, the immortal tenant of the fleshly body should not still feel some interest in the things of earth, amongst which it moved so long, and have the power and the permission to make its presence felt for warning and for guidance. It is very different to feel an awe and a dread in any undertaking, and to shrink from executing it. The young man did feel awe, for he was going in solitude and the midst of night into places where mortal foot rarely trod, where every association and every object was connected with dark and dreary memories, and with still more gloomy anticipations--the memorials of the dead, the mouldering ruins of fellow-men, the records of the tomb, the picture of all that warm existence comes to in the end. He stopped for a moment there, and gazed down into the dark void below, but the next instant, with a slow and careful foot upon the wet and slippery steps, he began the descent. The air, which was sultry above, felt cold and chilling as he descended, and the lamp burned dim, with a diminished flame, from the impure vapours that seemed congregated in the place. Each step, too, produced a hollow echo, ringing round, and decreasing gradually in sound, both above and below, till it seemed as if voices were whispering behind him and before him. Twice he paused to listen, scarcely able to persuade himself that he did not hear tongues speaking, but as he stopped the sound ceased, and again he proceeded on his way. The square cut stones forming the shaft in which the staircase turned, with the jointing only more clearly discernible from the mortar having

dropped out, soon gave way to the more solid masonry of nature, and the rude rock, roughly hewn, was all that was left around him, with the stairs still descending in the midst. A hundred and seventeen steps, some of them perilous from decay, brought him, at length, to the termination, with a door ajar at the foot. All was darkness beyond, and though there seemed a freer air as he pulled the door back, and the lamp burned up somewhat more clearly, yet the vast gloomy expanse before him lost scarcely a particle of its gloom, as he advanced with a beating heart, bearing the light in his hand. He was unconscious of touching the door as he passed, but the moment he had entered it swung slowly to, and a solemn clang echoed through the vault.

Laying his left hand on his dagger, he turned suddenly, and looked behind him, but there was no one there, and he saw nothing but the heavy stone walls and low groined arches, which seemed spreading out interminably on either side. The next moment a bat fluttered across, and swept his face with its cold dewy wing, nearly extinguishing the lamp as it passed; and then, as he took a few steps forward, a low voice asked, "Who is he?"

"Who? who?" several other voices seemed to say; and then another cried, "Hush!"

The young man caught the lamp in his left hand, and half drew his sword with his right, demanding aloud, "Who spoke?" There was no reply but the echo of his own voice amidst the arches; and holding the lamp before him, he turned to the side from which the first question seemed to proceed, and thought he saw a figure standing in the dim obscurity, at a few paces distance. "Who are you?" he cried, stepping forward, but there the figure stood, grew more defined as the rays fell upon it, and the eyeless grinning head, and long mouldy bones of a skeleton appeared, bound with a rusty chain to a thick column. Instinctively he started back, when he first discovered what the object was, and as he did so, a low, wild, echoing laugh rang round through the arches on every side, as if mocking the horror which his countenance expressed. Nothing showed itself, however, and, ashamed of his own sensations, he drew his sword out of the sheath, and walked quickly on. His path soon became encumbered, and first he stumbled over a slimy skull, then trod upon some bones that crunched under his feet, while strange whisperings seemed to spread around him, till, with no light joy, he saw the farther wall of the vault, with an open arch leading out into some place beyond. When he had passed it, however, the scene was no less sad and gloomy, for he seemed now in a vast building like a chapel, where, ranged on either hand, were sepulchral monuments covered with dust, and between them long piles of mouldering coffins, with overhead a banner here and there, gauntlets, and swords, and tattered surcoats, the hues of which could scarcely be distinguished through the deep stains and mildew that covered them. Here frowned the figure of a warrior in black marble, there lay another hewn in plain stone; here stood a pile of coffins, with the velvet which once covered them, and the gold with which they were fringed, all mouldering in shreds, and offering a stern comment on the grossest of human vanities, that tries to deck the grave with splendour, and serves up the banquet of the worm in tinsel. When he had half passed along the solemn avenue, he thought he heard a sound behind, and turned to look, but there was nothing near except three small coffins and the marble effigy of a lady kneeling in the attitude of prayer. When he turned round again, a sudden light, blue and pale, like that of the unconfirmed dawn, shone through the long arcades, wavered and flickered round, as if moving from place to place, though whence it proceeded he could not see; but as he strode on, it served to show him a large snake, that darted from under the crumbling base of one of the monuments, and glided on along the path before him, as if guiding him on his way.

"By Heaven! this is all very strange and horrible," he exclaimed, and instantly there was a wild "whoop," coming from several parts of the chapel. The pale light that shone around was extinguished, and nought remained but the dim lamp in his own hand.

He would not be turned back, however, but hurried only the more quickly forward till he reached a door at the opposite side. It was bolted within, but not locked; and pulling back the iron bar from the staple, he rushed out, the strong gust of the night air and the pattering drops of rain instantly extinguishing the lamp. A shrill scream met his ear as the door swung to behind him; but nevertheless he paused, and put his hand to his brow, with sensations in his bosom which he had never felt before, and which he was ashamed to feel.

While he thus stood a fierce flash of lightning blazed around, dazzling his eyes for a moment, but serving to show him the exact point of the rocky hill which he had now reached, and a path winding on down the woody descent, narrow, rough, and stony, looking more as if it had been traced by some torrent pouring down the side of the slope, than by the foot of man. Along it he turned his steps, guided by the trees and bushes, which rendered it impossible that he should miss his way, till, nearly at the bottom of the hill, a faint light shone before him from the window of what appeared a little chapel.

"The good priest is watching for me," the young man said to himself; and hurrying on he gained a small projecting point of the rock which stood out clear from amongst the trees. Like many another jagged fragment of crag in that wild country, it towered up above the surrounding objects like a ruined outwork of the castle above, and when he had climbed to the summit, the young wanderer turned to gaze up at the building he had just left. All was dark and gloomy; not a ray broke from window or loophole, except at one spot where a blaze shone forth upon the night high up in the sky, shining red and hazy through the tempestuous air, like some star of evil omen. But the youth heeded not that light; he knew well that it was the beacon on the highest pinnacle of the donjon, beside which, under shelter of the watch-tower's roof, the weary sentinel was

striving to keep himself awake, perhaps in vain. The rest was all as obscure as the world beyond the tomb, and satisfied that his going had not been marked, he hurried on to the little chapel or hermitage, and lifted the latch.

CHAPTER II.

The interior of the building into which the young man now entered, afforded a strange contrast to the wild and fearful scenes through which he had just passed. It was like life and death side by side--the world and the grave; and the change struck him as much, or perhaps more, than if the particulars had been reversed. It was a little cell, dependent upon the neighbouring monastery, with a chapel attached to it, dedicated to Our Lady; but the room into which the door immediately led was one of the two dwelling-chambers of the priests, who came up there in weekly turn to officiate at the chapel. It was low-roofed and small; but, nevertheless, it had an air of comfort and cheerfulness about it; and the large well-trimmed lamp showed the whole extent, and left not one corner in obscurity. A little table stood in the midst, with the good priest seated at it: a book open before him, and another closed at his side; but besides these objects of study or devotion, the table bore several things connected with our corporeal comfort, which showed that at all events the chapel was not a hermitage. There was a well-roasted capon, and two or three rolls or small loaves of white bread--a rarity in that part of the country, and at that time; and besides these, there appeared two or three neat glasses with twisted stalks, and a capacious green bottle, large in the bulb, flattened at the sides, and with a neck towering like a minaret. It was a very promising vessel indeed, for its peculiar shape, form, and thickness, were too expensive to be in general bestowed upon bad wine; and the monks were supposed in those days, as at present, to be very accurate judges of what was really good.

Amongst the most cheerful things in the place, however, was the countenance of the priest himself. He was a man of somewhat more than sixty years of age, but fresh, firm, and unbroken, with a complexion which, originally fair and smooth, seemed only to have grown fairer and more smooth with years; and though the untoussured part of his hair was as white as driven snow, his blue eye was as clear and bright as in youth. His features were high and somewhat aquiline; his eyebrows long and white; but that which denoted age more than aught else, was the falling in of the lips by the sad ravages of time upon those incessant plagues of life--the teeth. His countenance was a cheerful and contented one; not without lines of thought, and perhaps of care; but to the eye of one accustomed to read the character upon the face, the expression would have indicated a temperament and disposition naturally easy and good-humoured, without any want of mental energy and activity.

"Ah! Ferdinand," he said, as soon as he beheld his visitor, "you have kept me long, my son, but that matters not--it is a terrible night, and the way somewhat troublesome to find. But, all good angels! what makes you look so pale, boy? Yours is not a cheek to turn white at a flash of lightning. Sit down, sit down, my son, and refresh yourself. See, I have provided for your entertainment."

"The way is a terrible one, good Father," replied the young man, seating himself, and resting his arm upon the table, "and it is one I will never tread willingly again, unless it be to return home this night, though that I would not do, if there were any way of avoiding it."

"Why, how now, how now?" asked the priest. "Never let it be said that you have been frightened by a score of old monuments, and a few dry bones."

"That's not all, good Father, that's not all," answered the young man; and he proceeded to relate, in a low voice, all that he had heard and seen as he came thither.

"Phantasms of the imagination!" exclaimed the priest. "Voices in the serfs burying-place! lights in the chapel vaults! No, no, good youth, such things are quite impossible; these are but tales of the castle hall, told in the winter's evening round the fire, which have so filled your imagination that you realize them to yourself in a dark, stormy night, and a gloomy place. I have gone up there a hundred times, by night and day, and never yet saw aught but old crumbling stones and mouldy arches, and fleshless bones here and there; things fitted, surely, to produce solemn thoughts of the mortality of man's frame, of the vanity of all his works, and the emptiness of his glory, but not to fill your head with fancies such as these."

"But, Father, I tell you I heard the voices as distinctly as I hear you speak," the youth rejoined, in a half angry tone; "that I saw the light as plainly as I see this before me."

"A flash of lightning," replied the priest.

"No, no," answered his companion, "I never saw a flash of lightning that lasted uninterrupted, calm, and quiet, for five minutes, nor you either, Father; nor did I ever hear the thunder ask, 'Who is he?' nor laugh and hoot like a devil. I would not have believed it myself, had I not had eyes and ears to witness; and so I cannot blame you for doubting it. I never was a believer in ghosts or phantoms, or spirits visiting the earth, till now. I thought them but old women's tales, as you do."

"Nay, nay," exclaimed the priest, eagerly, "I did not say that;" and he fell into a deep fit of thought before he proceeded farther. At length he continued, in a grave tone, saying, "You must not suppose, Ferdinand, that I doubt, in any degree, that spirits are at times permitted to visit or revisit this world. We have the warrant of Scripture for it, and many facts of the kind are testified by fathers of the church, and holy men, whom it would be a sin to suspect of falsehood, and a presumption to accuse of foolishness. But I do think that in thousands of instances where such apparitions are supposed to have taken place, especially in the present day, there is much more either of folly or deception than of truth. In this case, although I have heard the women, and some of the boors, declare that they have seen strange sights about the castle, I have always fancied the report mere nonsense, as I never beheld anything of the kind myself; but there certainly was something odd and unaccountable in the Graf suddenly shutting up the great hall where his brother used always to feast with his retainers; and people did say that he had seen a sight there which had made him dread to enter it again; yet I have passed through the vaults and the hall, many a time since, without ever beholding aught to scare me."

"But take some food, my son, aye, and some wine too,--it will refresh and revive you."

The young man did not object, for, to say truth, he much needed refreshment, the agitation of the mind being always much more exhausting than mere corporeal fatigue. The good priest joined in his supper with moderation, but with evident satisfaction; for, alas that it should be so! yet, nevertheless, it is a fact, that as we advance in life, losing pleasure after pleasure, discovering the delusions of the imagination, which are mixed up with so many of our joys, and the deceitful character of not a few even of our intellectual delights, there is a strong tendency to repose upon the scanty remnant of mere material gratifications that are left to us by the infirmities of the body. He helped himself and his guest to a glass of the good wine, took another without hesitation, and then insisted upon Ferdinand replenishing his glass, and, encouraging him to do so, bore him company. The young man's spirits rose; the scenes he had just passed through were partially forgotten, and the feelings and impressions which he had felt before he set out, and which, indeed, had brought him thither, once more became predominant. Finishing his meal, he wiped his dagger, and thrust it back into the sheath; and then turning to the monk, he said, "Well, good Father George, I have come at your bidding, and would come further to please you, though I know not well what you want, even if I suspect a little. There was nothing very wrong, though I saw you gave me a frown."

"I never thought there was anything wrong, my son," replied the priest, gravely. "I saw the lady's hand in yours, it is true. I saw her eyes turned up to yours, with a very beaming look. I saw yours bent down on her, as if your knee would have soon bent also, but I never thought there was anything wrong--of course not."

His tone was perfectly serious; but whether it was conscience, or a knowledge that Father George did not altogether dislike a jest, even upon grave matters, Ferdinand could not help suspecting that his companion spoke ironically. He did not feel quite sure of it, however, and after considering for a moment, he replied, "Well, whatever you may think, Father, it was all very simple. Her horse had fallen with her in the morning; I had not seen her since I had aided to raise her, and I was only asking how she had fared after the accident."

"Nothing more, I doubt not," replied the priest, in the same tone.

"On my life, on my honour!" exclaimed the young man.

"And yet you love her, and she loves you, Ferdinand," rejoined Father George, with a quiet smile. "Deny it not, my boy, for it is a fact."

"Well," answered the youth, with a glowing cheek, "it may be true that I love her, but I love without hope, and I do trust--though perhaps you may not believe me when I say so--I do trust that she does not love me, for I would not, for my right hand, that she should ever know the bitterness of such hopeless passion."

"But why hopeless?" demanded the priest, and paused for an answer.

The young man gazed upon him in surprise, almost amounting to irritation; for deep feeling, except when it is so intense as to lose all sense of external things, will not bear to be trifled with, and he thought the old man was jesting with his passion.

"Why hopeless!" he exclaimed at length. "By difference of station, by difference of wealth, by all the cold respects and icy mandates of the world. Who am I, Father, that I should dare to lift my eyes to the daughter of a high and mighty lord like this! Noble I may be--you have told me so--but--"

"As noble as herself," replied the priest. "Nay, if blood be all, higher in station. True, fortune

has not befriended you, but that same goddess was ever a fickle and capricious dame, and those she raises high one day she sinks low the next, to lift up others in their stead. How many a mighty lord has been pulled from his chair of state, to end his days in dungeons. We have heard of emperors confined to a poor cell, and of princes and heroes begging their bread. The time may come, boy, when upon your arm may hang the fortunes of that lady's house, when to you she may cling for protection and support; and the sun that now shines for her father, may shine for you."

Ferdinand shook his head with a desponding smile, as if it were nigh a mockery to talk of such things. "Whence should those golden days come, Father?" he asked. "Even opportunity, the great touchstone of the heart and mind, the gate of all success, the pathway of ambition, love, and hope, is closed and barred to me. But yesterday--it seems but yesterday I was her father's page; and a day earlier, a boy running through the abbey grounds, under your kind care and good instruction--the object of your bounty, of your charity, I do believe--"

"Nay, not so," exclaimed the priest, quickly; "you had your little store of wealth when you fell to my charge, Ferdinand. I have doled it out as I thought best in your nurture and education, but I have still some remaining, which I have invested for you in land near the abbey, and am ready to account for all. But still, even if all were as you say, I see not why you should be in so hopeless a mood; all ladies may be won, all difficulties overcome. There is a chance given to every man in life, his be the fault if he do not seize it."

"The distance is too far, Father," answered the young man. "I have often, when I was a boy, stood and looked at the sun rising through the clouds, and when a bright, broad ray has travelled forth like a pall laid for some emperor's tread, stretching from the golden canopy hung over the ascending monarch of the day, and reaching well nigh to my feet, I have almost thought that I could tread upon it, and wend my way to heaven. But such fancies have passed now, Father; such suns no longer shine for me; and in the broad, harsh noonday of manhood, I dream such dreams no more."

"But you dream others no less bright, Ferdinand," replied the priest. "Visions of triumph in the field, and mighty deeds, and great renown, and service to the State, and beauty's smile; fame, happiness, and joy, float even now before your eyes, and those visions may prove true. Did I want proof that such things still are busy in your heart, your very gay and flowery words would show them to me. I am the last to bid you banish them, my son; when well directed and kept within reasonable bounds, they are often the harbingers of great success."

"But who shall direct them for me?" asked his young companion, who had heard encouragement so little expected with evident marks of surprise; "who shall fix the bounds to be called reasonable? To me most of those dreams seem foolish, especially that which is sweetest."

"I will direct, if you will let me," answered the priest. "I will fix the bounds; and to begin, I tell you that the hope you fancy the most visionary is the least so. But leave the matter to me, my dear Ferdinand; follow my counsel, and Adelaide shall be yours, and that speedily."

"Oh, Father!" exclaimed the young man, stretching forth his hand, and grasping that of the priest, "do not--do not, I beseech, you, raise in me such hopes, if there be a probability of their failure."

"There is none," replied Father George. "Pursue the course before you boldly; seek her resolutely, though calmly and secretly; tell her of your love; win her confidence, gain whatever ascendancy you can over her mind, and leave all the rest to me."

"But, Father, what will be said of my honour, when all is discovered, as it must be?" rejoined the young man. "What torrents of reproach will fall upon me,--what disgrace, what indignity, will not be heaped upon me! Danger I do not fear, death itself I would encounter, but for the chance of possessing her; but shame--I cannot bear shame, Father."

"Think you, my son," asked the priest, somewhat sternly, "that I would counsel you to anything that is disgraceful? I only advise you to caution and secrecy, because you would meet with opposition in the outset. Have no fear, however, as to the result. I will justify you fully. I have told you that you are her equal in birth, if not at present in wealth; that you have a right to seek her hand; nay, more, that if your heart goes with it, it is expedient both for you and her that you should do so."

"This is all a mystery to me," replied the young man, thoughtfully.

"Ay," answered the priest; "but there are many mysteries in this life, which it is well not to scan. However, if there be blame, your blame be upon me. Still, it is right that you should be able to show that you have not yielded to mere passion; and before you go, I will give you, under my hand, authority for what you do, for you must neither doubt nor hesitate."

"I do not hesitate, Father," said Ferdinand, with a smile. "Heaven knows that my heart prompts me only too eagerly to follow such pleasant counsel. I will go on, then; but you must be ever ready to advise and assist me; for, remember, I am working in the dark, and may need aid and direction in a thousand difficult circumstances, which neither I nor you foresee."

"Advice shall be ever at your command," answered Father George, "and aid, stronger and

better than perhaps you expect; only pursue implicitly the course I point out, and I will be answerable for the end. Now let us talk of other things. How goes the party at the castle--well and cheerfully?"

"Nay," replied the young man, "never very cheerful, good Father. The Count, [11](#) you know, is not of a merry disposition."

"No, indeed," said the priest, "he never was so, even from a youth; a dark, stern heart throws its shadow far around, as a bright and benevolent one casts light on everything. He's a very different man from his brother, the last Count, who was cheerfulness itself, full of gay jest and merry happiness, looking lightly and mirthfully upon all indifferent things, yet not without due reverence and feeling for the essential duties of a Catholic Christian and a man. Ah, those were merry days at the old castle, then. The board was always well filled in the great hall; good meat, good wine, gay guests, and pleasant talk--in which the noble lord himself still led others on to enjoy, and seemed to find a pleasure in their pleasure--those were things always to be found where there is now nothing but gloom, and state, and cold service. There were no ghosts then, Ferdinand; no spirits but cheerful ones haunted hall or bower;"--and the old man fell into a fit of thought, seeming to ponder pleasantly upon the times past, though they might contrast themselves in his mind with the darker aspect of the present.

Ferdinand also remained thoughtful for several minutes, but then rose, saying, "I must be wending my way homeward, Father, though I doubt I shall hardly find it, as I have now no lamp, and those vaults are intricate."

"Stay a while, stay a while," answered Father George, "the storm will not last long, and I will go with you. No spirits will show themselves in my presence, I am sure."

"Oh, I fear them not now," replied Ferdinand; "such hopes as you have given me to-night, Father, will be a spell to lay them."

The old man smiled, well knowing that, notwithstanding the boast, his young companion would not at all object to his company; but he merely replied, "I will take my lantern, youth; for without a light you might lose yourself in the caves, as some have done before you. Look out, and see how the sky appears. The thunder has ceased, I think."

The young man opened the door, and took a step forth, and then returning, said, "It lightens still, but faintly; and it rains a little. It will soon be over though, I think;" and seating himself again, he spent about half an hour more in conversation with the priest. At the end of that time, the rain having ceased, they set out together for the castle, while the faint flashes of the electric fluid, with which the air was still loaded, gleamed over the sky from time to time, and a distant roar to the westward told that the storm was visiting other lands. It was a toilsome journey up the steep ascent, rendered slippery by the wet, for a man of Father George's years, but he bore up stoutly, and at length they reached the entrance of the crypt below the chapel. Pushing the door open boldly, the old man went in, and advancing some twenty or thirty steps, held up the lantern and looked round. Nothing was to be seen, however, and no sound but the fall of their own footsteps reached the ear of either of the two wanderers, as they pursued their way through the chapel-vaults and the excavations in the rock against which the building was raised. In the midst of what was called the Serfs' Burying-place, however, close by the spot where the skeleton was chained to the column, Father George paused, and gazed for an instant at the sad sight which it presented. "Ah, poor fellow!" he said, "they bound him there, and strangled him against the pillar, for murdering his master, the last Count, when fighting far away; but to the last he declared, that whatever hand had done it, it was not his act--and I believed him, for he loved the Count well, and the Count loved him. 'Tis twenty years ago, and yet see how the bones hold together. Come on, my son; I will see you to the hall door, and then leave you."

Ferdinand, who was not at all partial to a prolonged stay in the vaults, readily followed, and when they reached the little door that led into the hall, the good priest remarked, with a quiet smile, "We have seen no ghosts, my son, nor heard them either."

"True, Father, true," replied the young man; "but those who have heard and seen must believe. I trust that you may pass back as unmolested as we came."

"I fear not, Ferdinand," answered Father George; "and what is more, you must also shake off all apprehensions; for in order to win her you love, you may have often to tread these same paths."

"If there were a devil in every niche, Father," replied Ferdinand, "I would face them all for her sake."

"Well, well, good night," said the priest, shaking his head: "love is the religion of a young man, and if it lead him not to wrong, it may lead him to things higher than itself. Keep the key as a treasure, good youth, for it may prove one to you in case of need."

Thus saying, the old man suffered him to light his lamp at the lantern, which was not done without difficulty, as the drops of rain had somewhat wetted the wick; and ere Ferdinand had reached the opposite end of the hall, after leaving the priest, his light was extinguished again,

and he had to feel his way to his own chamber, along the dark corridors and staircases of the building. He was wet and tired, but he felt no inclination to sleep, even though darkness continued for more than one hour after he had returned to the castle. There was a brighter light in his heart than that of morning, and in it the new-born hopes sported like gay children at their play. The hour passed away; and having cast off his wet garments, the youth lay down for a few minutes on the bed, but half dressed, thinking--"I will sleep if I can; for it is better they should accuse me of late rising than see from my pillow that it has not been pressed all night." But sleep, like all the pleasant things of life, will not come for much seeking. In vain he shut his eyes; the grey light of dawn found its way between the lashes, sounds were heard in the castle, showing that some of the inferior attendants had risen; and the night watch was relieved under the window of the tower in which he slept. A moment after, however, came another noise; a distant horn sounded, there was a cry of dogs borne from a distance on the air; and with all the quick temerity of aristocratic blood in regard to the sports of the field, the youth started up on his couch and listened. Again the deep melodious music of hound and horn was heard, and bounding from his bed, he threw open the casement and called to the guard, asking--"Is the Count abroad?"

The answer was in the negative, and throwing on hastily the rest of his dry clothes, the youth rushed out as if to combat an enemy.

CHAPTER III.

The morning rose bright and beautiful after the storm, shining down the valley, glittering on the stream, and illuminating the castle. High on its rock, from the base of which, steep and rugged as it was, stretched forth about a mile of more gradual descent, broken and undulating, thickly covered with trees, and here and there presenting a large mass of fallen stone, looking like the wall of some outwork, decayed by time, and garmented with moss. The whole surface on the summit of the hill was crowned with walls and towers, and such was the commanding situation which they occupied, that in days when the science of warfare, though often practised, was but little known, it might well seem a hopeless task to attempt to take that castle by any means but famine. On a lower point, or what may be called a step in the rock, appeared a very beautiful and graceful building, the lower part of which displayed strong masonry, and manifold round arches filled up with stone; while in the upper, the lighter architecture of a later period was seen, in thin buttresses and tall pointed windows, pinnacles, and mouldings, and fretwork. Built against the steep side of the cliff below the castle, there seemed at first sight no path to this chapel but from the fortress above, with which it was connected by a few steps, flanked by a low square tower; but to the eye of a traveller, riding or walking along the ridge of hills on the opposite side of the valley, glimpses of a path displayed themselves, winding in and out amongst the wood; and somewhat more than half-way down the hill appeared a small edifice, in the same style of architecture as the upper story of the castle-chapel.

On that opposite ridge of hills was another stronghold, or rather what had been so, for at the time I speak of, it was already in ruins;--and down below, on either hand, swept an ocean of green boughs, covering the declivities of the hills, and leaving a narrow track of little more than half a mile in breadth for verdant meadows, hamlets, and a small but beautiful stream. Following the course of the little river, the eye rested, at about two miles distance, upon the towers and pinnacles of a large building, half concealed in wood; and from the walls thereof, at the hours appointed for the various services of the Roman Catholic Church, might be heard the great bell of the abbey, swinging slow upon the breeze the call to prayer.

Beyond the abbey and the woods that surrounded it, a world of hill and valley was descried, with rocks tossed in wild confusion here and there, taking every different variety of form--now like a giant sitting on the side of a hill, now like the ruined wall of some old fortress, now like a column raised to commemorate some great event, now like the crest of a warrior's helmet, plumed with feathery trees; they offered to imagination infinite materials for the sport of fancy. All the hollows, too, except those directly facing the east, were filled with mists and shadows, while the tops of the mountains, the higher crags, the old ruins, and the steeple of a distant church, rose as if from the bosom of a dim and gloomy ocean.

"He!" exclaimed the young man; "who is he, boor--do you know him? Who is it dares to hunt in our lord's lands? If I caught him, he should pay dearly."

"Ah, Master Ferdinand of Altenburg, he is one who would make you pay more likely; but, luckily for you, you can neither cross nor catch him--it was the Black Huntsman and his train. We saw him with our own eyes, and you may go back and tell the Count to prepare for war. Twelve months will not pass from this day before there are armies warring here. Tell him that old Werner says so; and I have lived years enough to know what I am talking about."

"The Black Huntsman!" exclaimed Ferdinand, holding in his horse, which was struggling forward. "And did you see him, say you--both of you?"

"Ay, both of us," answered the old man. "And he shook his fist at Wettstein here, just because he looked at him a little too sharply."

"The Black Huntsman!" cried Ferdinand, again. "I never before knew any one who saw him. What was he like, Werner?"

"He seemed to me ten foot high!" exclaimed Wettstein, joining in; "and his horse big enough to bear him."

"Nay, nay, not ten foot," cried Werner; "eight he might be, or eight and a half--and all in black from head to heel. I did not see a white spot about him, or his horse either. Did you, Wettstein?"

"Not a freckle as big as a pea," replied his comrade.

"Here's a mighty great horse's footmark, to be sure," said one of the soldiers, who had dismounted, and was examining the ground. "I think, Sir, you had better go back and tell our lord, for he'll be glad to know of this."

The young man mused without reply for a moment or two, and then turning his horse, rode back towards the castle, halting from time to time to listen for the sounds of the hunt. All had now ceased, however; the valley had returned to its stillness, and nothing but the breeze sighing through the trees was heard, as Ferdinand and his followers rode up the opposite hill.

A number of men were collected under the arched gateway of the castle, and several horses stood ready saddled near, but before them all appeared a tall, dark-looking personage, somewhat past the middle age, but still in full vigour, with a stern and somewhat forbidding countenance. The expression was sharp, but not lofty, morose rather than firm, and as Ferdinand rode up and sprang to the ground, he exclaimed, "Ha, who are they, boy? Or have you turned back from laziness or fear, without having found them?"

Ferdinand's cheek grew red, and he replied, "If I had been fearful or lazy, my lord, I should have waited for orders ere I went to seek them; but when we reached the road leading to Lindenau, the sounds were scarcely to be heard, and we met Werner and Wettstein in the wood, who told us that it was the Black Huntsman."

"Ay, ay," exclaimed the Count, moodily; "doubtless the Black Huntsman. There is never a cry of hounds across the land, but, if you believe the peasants, it is the Black Huntsman. They are in league with the robbers of my deer and boars. The swine-fed rascals have their share, no doubt."

"But, my lord Count," replied one of the soldiers who had accompanied Ferdinand, "this time the men saw him, and he shook his fist at Wettstein for daring to look at him too close. Besides, old Werner is not a man to lie about it."

"Werner and Wettstein!" said the Count, "who are they? We have a hundred of such hogs in the valley."

"They are men of the abbey, my good lord," replied Ferdinand; "and at all events, they were both in the same story, and told it at once. One of our men, too,--it was you, Karl, was it not?--saw the hoof-marks much larger than the common size."

"Ay, that I did," replied the man; "as big as any two in the stable. My lord can see them too, if he doubts it."

"I will," replied the Count, sternly; and without more ado he turned into the castle, leaving the rest to follow to the morning meal.

Contrary to a very common practice of the day, when most of those who were qualified to bear arms were considered fit to sit at the table of their lords, the Count of Ehrenstein usually admitted none but two or three of his chosen followers to take part in the meal at the same board with himself and his daughter. The large hall, of which we have already spoken, had been long disused, and a smaller one, fully large enough, indeed, for the diminished number of retainers which the castle now contained, was divided into two unequal parts by a step, which raised the table of the lord above that of his vassals. It was to this hall he now took his way, moving slowly onward with a heavy step and eyes fixed upon the ground, till, opening the door, he gazed round it for a moment, and his face lighted up with the first look of pleasure it had displayed that day, as his eyes rested on a group at the farther end of the chamber. From the midst of that group, with a light bounding step, was even then coming forward to meet him, as beautiful a form as was ever beheld, even by a father's eyes; and what father in his heart has never said, when gazing on his child--

"Du nun als ein Engel schön?"

Young she was, very young--in the first early bloom of youth, and wonderfully fair--for no

marble that was ever hewn by the most fastidious sculptor's hands, was whiter, clearer, softer, than her skin; and yet there was a glow of health therein, not seeming in the skin itself, but shining through it, like the rosy light of morning pouring into the pale sky. Her eyes could hardly be called blue, for there was a shade of some other colour in them; but the long black lashes, together with the strong contrast afforded by the fairness of her face, made them look dark, though soft, till one approached her very near. Her dark brown hair, too, full to profusion, looked almost black where it fell upon her neck, notwithstanding the bright golden gleams that shone upon the wavy clusters. Round, yet tapering, every limb was moulded in the most beautiful symmetry, which even the long line of floating garments from the hip to the heel shadowed without concealing; and, as almost always happens, perfection of form produced grace of movement, though that grace is in some degree dependent also upon the spirit within, where it is natural and not acquired. Even in the light, quick, bounding step with which she sprang to meet her father, there was a world of beauty, though it was simply the unstudied impulse of filial affection; and for an instant, as I have said, the very sight of her bright countenance dispelled the gloom upon her father's face, and brought a momentary gleam of sunshine over it; but the grave, hard look soon returned, and taking her hand in his, he led her on to the upper table, calling to him two of his old ritters or knights, and seated them beside himself and his child.

Ferdinand of Altenburg was about to take his place as usual at the other board, not judging that he stood at all high in the graces of his lord; but after a moment's consideration, the Count beckoned him up, saying, "Sit there, Ferdinand," and then commenced the meal in silence. Adelaide of Ehrenstein looked down, but yet a momentary light shone in her eyes, and a well-pleased smile, before she could check it, played round her lip; and then, as if afraid that the pleasure she felt should be marked by too watchful eyes, the colour glowed warm in her cheek, and even tinged her fair brow. Oh, those traitorous blushes, how often they hang out the flag of surrender, when the garrison would fain hold firm. The young lover saw the look, and judged it rightly; but no one else seemed to remark it; and while he was thinking what could be the Count's motive in thus honouring him, his lord raised his eyes heavily, saying, "And do you really believe this story of the Wild Huntsman, Ferdinand?"

"Nay, my lord, I know not what to think," replied the youth. "The men seemed so frightened themselves, and spoke so naturally, that I could not doubt that they believed it. Nevertheless, if I could have heard the sounds any more, I should have followed to see this Black Huntsman with my own eyes, but the noise was by that time done."

"Would you not have feared to meet him?" asked the Count, with a smile.

"Not I, Sir," answered Ferdinand. "If I find any one hunting on my lord's lands, I will stop him and ask his right, be he black or white. But we could never catch the noise again and there was another reason, too, that made me think it best to return; the old man, Werner, bade me tell you there would be war within a year."

"And so there will," replied the Count, "if it be truly the Black Huntsman."

"I am glad to hear it," replied Ferdinand; "there will be some chance of honour and distinction then."

The Count's brow grew dark. "Ay, foolish youth," he answered, "and what sums of gold will have to be spent, what fair fields ruined, what crops swept away!"

"And what bloodshed!" said Adelaide, in a low tone. "Oh, my father, I hope it will not be!"

"Bloodshed, that's but a small matter," replied her father, with a grim smile. "It does good to these hot youths to bleed them. Is it not so, Seckendorf?"

"Ay, my lord," answered the old knight to whom he spoke; "and as to the gold and the crops, that's no great matter either. Money must be spent, soldiers must live; and it's a pleasant sight to see a troop of bold fellows in a vineyard swilling the fat boor's grapes. I don't let them burn the houses, unless there's resistance; for there's no good in that, if the knaves give up their money and their food."

Adelaide was silent, but as she gazed down, with her beautiful eyes full of deep thought, many a dark image of spoliation and cruelty presented itself to fancy as approaching in the train of war. Her father was silent too; for he knew that his somewhat unknighthly love of gold was not likely to raise him in the opinion of his followers; but at length he said, "Well, then, we must prepare, at all events, Seckendorf, if this be the Black Huntsman."

"Ay, that we must, my good lord," replied the old man. "He never comes out without being sure of what he's about. I remember when I was in the Odenwalde, with the lord of Erlach, looking at the book in which is written down each time he has gone forth for these two hundred years--"

"And you couldn't read it if you did look," said the other knight, who was at the same table.

"Ay, I know that," replied Seckendorf; "no one better; so I made the sacristan read to me, and it never failed once, when that Black Horseman went forth, or when the cry of his dogs was heard, that there was war within a twelvemonth. But it is right to be sure that this was he; for it

would not do to sit here with the place cooped full of men, fretting ourselves for a year, with the thought of a brave war coming, and then for none to come after all. We should be obliged to have a feud with some friend, just to give the men something to do."

"True, true," answered the Count, with a quick assent; "that would not do at all, Seckendorf. I will go after meat, and inquire more into the affair."

"You had better see the two men, my Lord Count," said Ferdinand. "I will fetch them up from the abbey in an hour, and you can question them yourself."

"No, you will stay where you are, Sir," replied his lord, sharply; "I can question them myself without your help. I will see these hoof-marks too. But tell me more; from the sounds I heard as I hurried from my bed, there must have been a whole host of followers with this Black Huntsman. What said the man?"

In return, Ferdinand gave as good an account as he could of all that had occurred, though he had little to add to what he had told before. He neither exaggerated nor coloured his narrative, but with the vice of youth he indulged in many a figure to express his meaning, as was indeed somewhat customary with him; drawing freely upon imagination for the language, though not for the facts. This mode, however, of telling his tale, did not altogether please his lord, upon whose brow an impatient frown gathered fast. But Adelaide paid his flights of fancy with a smile, and her father's anger was averted by a man coming in hastily from the walls to announce that some one who seemed a messenger was riding up at full speed towards the castle.

"Let him be brought in," replied the Count; and he added, with a laugh, "perhaps this may be news of the Black Huntsman."

Expectation is ever a silent mood; and the meal continued; even the wine circulated without anything more being said, till at length a man dirty with hard riding through a country still wet with the storm of the preceding night, was brought in, with formal ceremony, by two of the Count's attendants, and led to the table at which he sat. The stranger seemed a simple messenger in the garb of peace, and in his hand he bore one of the large folded letters of the day, inscribed with innumerable titles then and still given to every German nobleman of rank, and sealed with a broad seal of yellow wax.

"Who come you from?" demanded the Count, before he opened the letter which the messenger presented.

"From the high and mighty prince, Count Frederick of Leiningen," replied the man; "who bade me bear this letter to the noble and excellent lord, the Count of Ehrenstein, his old and valued friend, and bring him back an answer speedily."

"Ah! where is the Count?" exclaimed the lord of Ehrenstein; "when came he back? 'Tis many a year since we have met."

"He stopped last night, noble Sir, at an abbey some ten miles beyond Zweibrücken, and he will reach that place this day," replied the messenger, answering only one of the Count's questions. "I pray you read the letter and let me have my answer."

The Count cut the silk, and, unfolding the paper, read, while Seckendorf commented in a low tone, with words of admiration, but with something like a sneer upon his lip, at his lord's learning, which enabled him to gather easily the contents of what seemed a somewhat lengthy epistle.

"Ah, this is good news indeed!" exclaimed the Count, at length. "First, that I should see again and embrace my old friend and comrade, Count Frederick;" and he bowed his head, not ungracefully, to the messenger. "Next, that your lord has, after so many years, collected together some of my poor brother's wealth, which he went to cast away with his life upon a foreign shore. It will come well, Seckendorf, if the Black Huntsman make his promise of war good.--You, Sir, take some refreshment, while I go to write the safe-conduct which your lord requires. Then you shall spur on, as hastily as may be; for, if not, I shall overtake you on the road. Tell the mighty Count, that I will not answer his letter till I've held my old friend in my arms, and that he shall see me at once at Zweibrücken ere two hours past noon." Thus saying, he rose and left the hall, and while Seckendorf and the other knight made the messenger sit down at the lower table, furnished him with food and wine, and questioned him eagerly as to Count Frederick's journey, and when he had returned from eastern lands, Ferdinand of Altenburg leaned across the table, and spoke a few low words to Adelaide of Ehrenstein, which made the colour come and go in her cheek, as if some strong emotions were busy in her heart. Whatever he said, indeed, was very brief, for he feared to draw the notice of those around upon them both; and in a moment after he had ceased, the Count returned, with a paper in his hand. The messenger would not wait to finish his meal, but retired from the hall, remounted his horse, and spurred on his way back.

As soon as he was gone, the tables were cleared, and orders given for instant preparation, that the Count might set out to meet his friend, with all the state and display that befitted his station. Before he went, he whispered to Seckendorf to bring up during his absence, all the vassals from the neighbouring estates, to swell the number of retainers in the castle, against the following day; to sweep the country round of its poultry, eggs, and fruit--a pleasant mark of paternal

affection which the peasantry of that day not unfrequently received from their lords; and to prepare everything for one of those scenes of festivity which occasionally chequered the monotony of feudal life in peaceful times.

Ferdinand of Altenburg stood ready to accompany his lord, with his horse saddled, and his gayest garment displayed, never doubting for a moment that he was to form one of the train. No sooner, however, had the Count done speaking to the old knight, than he turned towards the youth, saying, sharply, "Did I not tell you that you were not to go? You will stay and guard the castle while Seckendorf is absent, and go no farther from it, till I return, than the stream on one side, or the hamlet on the other."

The tone was haughty and imperious; and Ferdinand felt his heart burn, but he merely bowed, and took a step back; the Count, fancying that he had mortified him by leaving him behind, and feeling that sort of bitter pleasure which harsh men find in giving pain, though, in truth, if he had sought to consult the youth's most anxious wishes, he would have acted just as he did act. What was to Ferdinand, Count Frederick of Leiningen? What cared he for the meeting of two haughty lords? In the castle of Ehrenstein remained Adelaide; and where she was, even though he might not see her, there was festival for him.

Adelaide had left the hall while the preparations for her father's journey were being made, and was not present when he departed. Old Seckendorf bustled about for nearly half an hour after the Count was gone, choosing out men, from those left in the castle, to accompany him upon what was neither more nor less than a marauding expedition; and he then set out with right good will to perform a part of his duty which he loved the best. Ferdinand of Altenburg watched from the battlements of one of the towers the train of his lord, as it crossed the valley and mounted the opposite hill, and then fixing his eyes on the spot where the road, emerging from the wood again, wound on through the distant country, continued to gaze till the last horseman disappeared on the road to Zweibrücken. He then paced up and down till Seckendorf and his people also were gone, and then paused, leaning thoughtfully against the wall, as if considering what was next to be done.

The world is full of thin partitions, moral and physical, so slight, so feeble in appearance, that one would think they would fall with a touch, but often more strong than doors of brass or iron; and like the airy limits of two hostile countries, they are full of dangers to those who pass them. There, in the same dwelling, with nought between him and her but a door that would at once yield to his hand, was she whom he loved. His heart beat to go and join her; hers he fondly hoped would flutter gladly to have him near; but yet he dared not go. Surrounded by her women, as he believed she was, he knew that the risk of such a step would be great to all his future hopes; and yet he asked himself again and again, if he must lose so bright an opportunity. It might never return; all the manifold chances of human fate presented themselves to his mind, and he would have been less than a lover, if he had not resolved to find some means of drawing sweet advantage from the golden present. How? was the only question; and after long thought, he descended slowly by the steps that led to the battlements beneath the lady's window, and there seating himself, with his eyes turned over the distant country, as if simply whiling away an idle hour, he sat and sang:--

SONG.

Wander with me, loved one, loved one,
Wander with me where none can see;
Through the wood,
By the flood,
Under the greenwood tree.

Wander with me, loved one, loved one,
Wander with me where none can hear;
Where none is nigh,
But the birds that fly,
And the timid and silent deer.

Wander with me, loved one, loved one.
Wander with me where none can mark;
Where the leaves green,
Our love shall screen,
In their bower 'twixt light and dark.

Wander with me, loved one, loved one,
And a tale to thee I'll tell,
Which, if thy heart
With mine takes part,
Shall please thine ear right well.

As he ended, the casement, which was partly open, was drawn fully back, and the head of a gay, light-hearted girl, one of Adelaide's attendants, was thrust forth with a laughing countenance, exclaiming, "Get ye gone, you vile singer! no one can rest in peace for your harsh voice. Methought it was a raven or a daw cawing on the battlements, and our lady cannot read

her missal for hearing thee talk of thy 'loved one, loved one.'"

"Nay, let him alone," said Adelaide, advancing to the window; "I love music, Bertha; 'tis that thou canst not sing a note thyself that makes thee jealous. Sing on, if thou wilt, Ferdinand; I would listen to you with right good will, but that I promised Father George to come down to the shrine to-day; and I must read before I go."

She said no more, and did not even look at him while she spoke, but the gay girl Bertha's eyes twinkled with an arch smile upon her lips, as if she guessed more than either the lady or her lover suspected. Ferdinand replied little, but slowly moved away: and in about ten minutes after he might be seen going forth from the castle gates, and taking the road which led away in a different direction from the chapel in the wood.

The reader need not be told that in every portion of life, in all life's doings, in everything moral and physical, there are circuitous paths; nor that nine times out of ten, when a man seems to be doing one thing, he is doing another. It is a sad truth, a bitter dark reality; so much so, indeed, that those who have watched man's ways most closely, will best understand the force and beauty of the words which the inspired writer uses,--"a man without a shadow of turning"--to express all that we should be, and are not. However, in that deep wood that cloaked the side of the hills, there were nearly as many crooked paths and tortuous roads as in human life. Ferdinand took his path to the north, the chapel lay to the south. The watchman saw him go, and thought no more of it; but the keen eye of the gay girl Bertha marked him also, and she smiled. Some half hour after, when her young mistress went out alone, and bent her steps towards the chapel, Bertha laughed.

CHAPTER IV.

About an hour and a half after Ferdinand's song had ceased, the door of the chapel, which had been closed, opened, and two figures came forth under the green shadow of the forest leaves. The first was that of Adelaide of Ehrenstein, and her face bore tokens of recent agitation. By her side appeared good Father George, with his head uncovered, and no staff in his hand. He was speaking with the lady, earnestly but gently, and he still continued to walk on with her for some yards up the hill. More than once, as they went, Adelaide's eyes were turned to either side of the path, as if she feared or expected some interruption, and though she said not a word to indicate what was passing in her heart, the good Father marked the sort of anxiety she seemed to feel, and at length paused, saying, "Well, my child, I will go with you no farther. You will be quite safe on your way back; and if you attend to my voice, and follow my counsel, you might be happy yourself, and save others worlds of pain."

He did not pause for a reply, but turned, and re-entered the chapel, leaving Adelaide to pursue her way through the wood, with almost every path of which she had been familiar from infancy. Nevertheless, as she went, she still continued to look timidly round. She did not go far alone, however, for just as she passed the first turning, which hid the chapel from the eye, there was a step near, and Ferdinand was by her side.

"Oh, Ferdinand!" she said, "I am terrified. What is it you want to say? If any one were to find me here with you alone, what would they think?--and my father, if he heard it, it would bring destruction on your head too."

"Fear not, fear not," replied her lover; "turn into this path with me, dear Adelaide, it will bring you as quickly to the castle as the other, and we can speak there more freely."

His fair companion hesitated; but taking her hand in his, he led her gently forward, though not without a glowing cheek and eyes cast down. It was a small footway, which horses could not travel, and wound with many a turn up to the top of the high hill on which the castle stood. The short green mountain turf, the broken masses of rock here and there, the straggling boughs reaching across, and the wild flowers springing uncrushed, even in the midst of the path, showed that it was trodden by no very frequent feet. The green branches crossing on high shaded it from the sun; except when, about the hour of noon, his searching rays poured down, slept on a mossy bank here and there, or chequered the grass with dancing light and shade. The dove and the wood-pigeon murmured overhead, the breeze sighed faintly through the leaves, and the nightingale--still in song--trilled his rich notes upon many a bough above. There was a tenderness and yet a freshness in the air; there was a calming and softening light upon the way; there was a loveliness and a promise, and a wooing gentleness in the whole scene, that fitted it well for lovers and for love. The voice of nature seemed counselling affection; the aspect of all things harmonized with the passion in each of those two young hearts; and though Ferdinand was not skilled enough in the mystery of association to have chosen that scene as one likely to melt and

touch the heart he sought to make his own, yet he could not have found one on the whole earth better adapted for the tale he had to tell. He lost no time ere he told it; and though his words were ardent--ay, and even impassioned--yet there was a gentleness in his whole tone, a soft and deprecating look upon his countenance, a tenderness as well as a warmth in all he said, which prevented the young and timid woman's heart from feeling much of that sort of apprehension with which it often shrinks from the first touch of love. Brought up with him almost from her childhood, unlearned in the ways of the world, left nearly to solitude since her mother's death, with no other companion in her girlhood but him who walked beside her, and loving him with a love that had still increased, Adelaide felt it less strange to listen to such words from him, than she would have done with any other human being. She felt it less difficult, too, to reply to him, timidly, yet frankly, not concealing what she felt, even when she did not speak it.

He told her how long he had loved,--for a few short years, or even months, were long in their short lives. He told her how the affection of the boy had grown into the passion of the man; how the fraternal tenderness of early life had warmed into the ardent affection of maturity. He told her, too, how hope had been first illumined in his heart by light that seemed to shine forth from hers; how words that she had spoken without feeling their full import, had bid him not despair; how smiles from her lips, and rays from her eyes, had nourished and expanded the flower of love in his bosom. He went on to relate how he had trembled, and feared, and doubted, and hesitated, when he first became conscious of the full strength of all his sensations; how he had put a guard upon himself; how he had refrained from seeing her alone; how he had resisted many a temptation; but how the power of the passion within had overcome all prudent care, and had made him more than once speak words of tenderness, in spite of every effort to restrain them. With the rich, wild imagery of a warm and glowing imagination, and of a heart full of eager affection, he depicted the pangs he had endured, the struggles he had undergone, the cares and anxieties which had been his companions during the day, the bitter and despairing thoughts which had haunted him through the night. But at length he explained how hope had dawned upon him; how assurance and comfort had been given him the night before; and how one, upon whom they could both depend, had encouraged him to persevere, and held out mysterious hopes of fortune and success.

He did not, indeed, pursue his tale evenly to the close; for more than once his fair companion murmured a few words of compassion for what he had suffered, of anxiety for his safety, of doubt regarding the future; all of which were very sweet, for all showed him too happily, too brightly, that he was loved in return; and when at length he referred to his conversation with the priest, and to the expectations which had been held out, she looked eagerly up in his face, replying without disguise, "So he said to me, Ferdinand. He spoke of strange and mysterious things; of my fate and that of my house being linked to yours by an unseen tie; which, if it were broken, would bring ruin on us all. I could not understand him. I doubted, for I could scarcely believe such happy tidings true."

She paused and coloured, as soon as the words were spoken; and blushed more deeply still when he asked, "Then they were happy, dear Adelaide?"

"You do not doubt it," she murmured, after a moment's silence. "But at all events," she continued--suddenly turning from the question--"my mother told me, the very last time she held me in her arms, to trust to what he might say; and now he bids me give myself to you, without fear or doubt. I know not what to think."

"Think that he directs you right, dear Adelaide," replied her lover eagerly; "and oh! follow his guidance, and the guidance of your own heart."

She was silent for some minutes, walking on by his side, till at length he asked, "Will you not promise, Adelaide, will you not promise to be mine?"

"How can I--how dare I?" she answered. "Without my father's will, what good were my promise, Ferdinand?"

"All, everything to me," answered her lover; "for that promise once given you would not break it, dear one. Who can tell what your father may design? Who can tell that he may not some day seek to drive you to a marriage with one you hate; or, at best, can never love? But that promise once given to me, would be strength to you, my beloved, as well as comfort and assurance to myself. It would be the rainbow of my life; a pledge that there would be no more destruction of all hopes. Oh! dear girl, do not refuse me; give me back comfort and joy; give me back light and sunshine; give me that security against all I dread; give me that support in danger, that consolation in affliction, that object of endeavour and of hope. Were it but the voice of a lover, Adelaide, you might well hesitate, you might well doubt; but one who has no passion to serve, who is calmer, alas! than I can be; who knows more than we know, and judges more wisely than we can judge--one for whom your dear mother bespoke your confidence; one whom you promised her to trust and to rely on he urges you as strongly even as I do, and bids you follow the course in which love would lead, not for my sake alone, but for your own also."

They had reached a spot, by this time, where the wood fell back a little from the path on one side, and a low, rocky bank appeared on the other, crowned with old beeches. A spring of bright, clear water welled from the stone, filling a basin that some careful hand had carved below; while above, in a little niche, was placed a figure of the Virgin, with the infant Saviour in her arms; and

Ferdinand, extending his hand towards the well, added earnestly, "Here I, at least, Adelaide, saw that dear lady for the last time; here she taught us to kneel down and pray together, not many days before she laid that injunction upon you. And now, dear Adelaide, now you will not refuse me now you will follow the counsel to which she pointed--and promise to be mine."

There was love in her heart, there was a voice in her own bosom spoke more eloquently than his; she wavered--she yielded. He saw the colour come and go; he saw the bright eyes full of tears; he saw the lip quiver, and he cried, "Oh! promise, promise, Adelaide!"

"Well, I do," she murmured; and at the same instant a voice near seemed to say, "Promised, promised!"

Both started and looked round, but nothing was to be seen. The clear light streamed through the trees on the top of the bank, suffering the eye to see for some way between their trunks; the open space behind was considerable, and no place of concealment appeared to be near.

"It was but the echo, dearest," said Ferdinand; and pronouncing a word or two sharply, there was a slight return of the sound. Adelaide was not satisfied, however, and laying her hand upon his arm, she said in a low tone, "Come away, come away. Oh, Heaven! if any one should have discovered us!"

"No fear, no fear, dearest," replied her lover, walking on by her side. "But to guard against discovery for the future, Adelaide, we must devise some means of communication. Is there any one near you, whom you can trust, my beloved?"

"No one but Bertha," answered the lady: "I can trust her, I am sure, for she is good and true; but yet I do not think I could ever make up my mind to speak to her on the subject first."

Ferdinand mused for a moment or two, with a smile upon his lips; and then replied, "I almost suspect, Adelaide, that Bertha will not require much information. If I might judge by her look to-day, she's already aware of more than you suspect."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Adelaide, "do not say so. If she is, my conduct must have been very imprudent."

"Her eye may have been very keen," replied her companion; "but if you think you can trust her, I will speak to her upon the subject myself--cautiously and carefully, you know, dear one, so as not to tell her more than is necessary at once; but, indeed, I can foresee many circumstances in which we shall have absolute need of some one to aid us--of some one who can give tidings of each to the other, when all opportunity of private intercourse may be denied us."

"You must judge, Ferdinand, you must judge," answered Adelaide; "but, indeed, I fear I have done wrong already, and tremble to look forward to the coming time. And now, leave me, dear Ferdinand. We are near the castle, and you ought not to go with me further. Every step agitates and terrifies me, and I would fain seek my own chamber, and think."

Still Ferdinand lingered, however, for some time longer; still he detained his fair companion; nor would he part with her till love's first caress was given, and the bond between them sealed upon her lips. But at length Adelaide withdrew her hand, half smiling, half chiding, and hurried away, leaving him to follow some time after. When she reached the castle, she passed the room where she had before been sitting, catching with a glowing cheek a gay, arch look that Bertha directed towards her; and entering her bed-room, cast herself upon her knees and prayed, while tears of agitation and alarm, both at her own sensations, and at what she had promised, rolled over the dark lashes of her eyes, and trickled down her cheek. Young love is ever timid; but in her case there were other feelings which moved her strongly and painfully. She was not satisfied with her own conduct; she feared she had done wrong; and for that one day she acted the part of a severe censor on herself. True, her father's demeanour little invited confidence; true, he was often harsh and severe, even to her; true, from him she could expect no consideration for her wishes or for her feelings; but yet he was her father, the one whom she was bound to love and to obey; and her own heart would not altogether acquit her, even though love pleaded eloquently on her behalf. I have said that she thus felt and suffered for that one day; for, as will be seen hereafter, a strange and sudden change came over her, and with no apparent reason, she soon gave herself up unboundedly to the full influence of, her attachment. The human heart is a strange thing; but very often, for visible effects which seem unaccountable, there are secret causes sufficient for all. In our dealings with the world, and with each of our fellow-men, we are too often unjust, not so much from judging wrongly, as from judging at all. "Man can but judge from what he knows," is the common cry of those who find themselves fearfully wrong when all is explained; but the question which each should ask himself is, "Am I called upon to judge at all?" and too often the reply would be, "Judge not, and thou shalt not be judged; condemn not, and thou shalt not be condemned." Sufficient, surely, is the awful responsibility of judging, when duty or self-defence forces it upon us; how terrible, then, the weight when we undertake to decide unnecessarily upon the conduct of others, without seeing the circumstances, without hearing the evidence, without knowing the motives,--and yet we do it every day, and every hour, in our deeds, in our words, and in our thoughts, lacking that true charity of the heart that thinketh no evil. But man has become a beast of prey: the laws prevent him from tearing his fellows with his teeth, and the human tiger preys upon them in his thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

There are men who rise from a low station to a throne; and it certainly must be a grand and triumphant sensation which they experience when first they sit in the seat of sovereignty, and feel their brows pressed by the golden circlet of command, with the great objects of ambition all attained, the struggle up the steep ascent to power accomplished, and the end reached for which they have fought, and laboured, and watched through many a weary day and night. But the exultation of that moment, great as it may be, is nothing to that which fills the heart of youth in the first moment of successful love. The new-throned usurper must be well-nigh weary of repeated triumphs; for the step to the throne is but the last of many a fatiguing footfall in the path of ambition. He, too, must foresee innumerable dangers and difficulties round; for the experience of the past must teach him that in his race there is no goal, that the prize is never really won, that he may have distanced all others, but that he must still run on. Not so with the lover in the early hours of his success; his is the first step in the course of joy, and the brightest, because the first. Fresh from all the dreams of youth, it is to him the sweetest of realities; unwearied with the bitter task of experience, he has the capability of enjoyment as well as the expectation of repose. The brightness of the present spreads a veil of misty light over all that is threatening in the future; and the well of sweet waters in the heart seems inexhaustible.

With what a different step Ferdinand of Altenburg trod the halls of the castle on his return; with what a different view he looked on all things round him! The gloomy towers, the shadowy chambers, the long, cheerless corridors, seemed full of light; and there was a gay and laughing spirit in his heart which had not been there since love first became its tenant. He could have jested, he could have sported like a child; but, alas! there was no one to jest or sport with, for not more than five or six men were left in the castle after the train of the Count and the little band of Seckendorf had departed. Adelaide, too, remained in her own apartments, whither he dared not venture; and none of the two or three girls who attended upon her, and who, with an elderly dame, whose principal function appeared to be to quarrel with the chief butler, formed all the female inmates of Ehrenstein, ventured forth for nearly two hours after his return. Bertha, indeed, looked at him once, as he paced the battlements below the windows of the room in which she sat, but maliciously kept the casement closed, suspecting, perhaps, that he had had enough enjoyment for one day. Anxious to speak with her, and to carry out his plan for making her the means of communicating with her mistress, Ferdinand, as he turned back again, ventured to make her a sign to join him; but Bertha took no notice, and plied her busy hands on the embroidery frame where she sat, without seeming even to see him.

The poor lover's first happy day promised but a dull passing. Those were not days of many books; and perhaps, in the whole extent of the castle, not more than four or five were to be found. But Ferdinand could not have read, even had they been to be procured, for his whole thoughts were in that busy and excited state, in which it was impossible to fix his mind with attention upon anything but his own fate and projects. He went the whole round of the castle; then he saw that everything was in order; he spoke to the men who were in the execution of their daily duties; and often as he went, he fell into a fit of thought, where fancy rapt him far away, wandering in bright sunny lands, side by side with her he loved. At length, returning to the corridor above, through which he knew that both Adelaide and Bertha must pass, if either came forth from the ladies' apartments, he stationed himself at one of the windows, and continued to gaze out over the wide extent of forest, and hill, and dale, which the prospect presented. All was silent and quiet. A dreamy stillness hung over the whole place; the sunshine itself seemed to sleep quietly over the motionless masses of the trees, and never was there an hour or a scene in which a young lover might indulge the glittering visions of imagination, with less to distract or interrupt his thoughts.

The last four-and-twenty hours had been busy ones in Ferdinand's life--busy in emotions, if not in action; and they had been varied too by many a change of sensation, by much despondency, by awe and by fear, and by hope and joy. But if the truth must be told, it was only on the hope and joy that his mind dwelt. The strange and fearful scenes through which he had passed the night before were forgotten, or at least not thought of; the sorrows that were past gave but a sort of shadowy relief to the bright aspect of the present; difficulties, impediments, dangers, were unheeded or unseen.

For not more than half an hour, however, was he suffered thus to dream; for, at the end of that time, the door at which he had looked up as he passed on the preceding night was opened and closed; and turning quickly round he saw Bertha gliding down the corridor towards the top of the staircase. She laid her finger on her lips as she passed him; and, without speaking, he followed where she led.

The gay girl took her way to the battlements on the shady side of the castle, to which few of the rooms of the building were turned; there she paused, and looked gaily at Ferdinand, with her dark eyes sparkling, and her pretty little lip curling with fun and malice. "Impudent young man," she said, as he joined her, "how can you do such things? first singing a love song under my window, and then making me a sign to come and join you. I'm a great deal too good-natured, and too tender thus to indulge you. If our lady were to find out that we were lovers, she would tell her father and then we should soon both be sent out of the castle."

She spoke as gravely as she could; and though her gay look might eye some indication of what was passing within, yet Bertha's eyes were always such merry ones, that Ferdinand felt not a little embarrassed how to answer what perhaps might be a jest, but which might yet be serious also. She enjoyed his perplexity for a moment or two, and then asked in a sharp tone, "Well, Sir, why don't you speak if you have anything to say? If you don't, I must give you something to talk about. Tell me, Sir, what is it has made my mistress so sad since she went out and met you in the wood?"

"Sad is she?" exclaimed Ferdinand, alarmed; "I know nought that should make her sad."

"Well, she is," replied Bertha; "for she's shut up in her own room, and Theresa compassionately looked through the keyhole, and told us she was weeping."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed Ferdinand, still hesitating whether he should acknowledge that he had met Adelaide or not. "Nothing I have ever done could give her pain."

"Well, don't look so terrified, Sir lover," answered Bertha; "there are a thousand other things beside pain that make women weep; sometimes joy, sometimes fright; and perhaps it is the last in this case."

"But why should she fear?" asked Ferdinand.

"Nay, that you know best," replied Bertha. "You've neither of you thought fit to tell me anything about it; but you had a great deal better; for, if you don't, depend upon it you'll get yourselves into all manner of difficulties and dangers. You are both of you as imprudent and as ignorant of such matters as if you were twelve years old; and I should not wonder if you were to have yourself strangled for making love to your lord's daughter, and to get her either shut up in a convent, or married in haste to some fierce old baron, who may maltreat her, as my good and noble lord, the Count, used his poor wife."

"Nay, now you are trying to tease me, pretty Bertha," replied Ferdinand of Altenburg. "As I see you know a great deal, I may as well tell you all; and I will, if you can be serious; but if you go on in jest with me, I will jest with you, and may find means to tease you too."

"Nay, am not jesting at all," answered Bertha, more gravely; "all I have said is true enough: and I can tell you I have been in a great fright for you both for some time. For during the last month I have been terrified every day lest others should see what was plain enough to my eyes. Do you consider what it is you are doing, and what sort of a man our lord is--that he would no more hesitate to put you to death in the castle-ditch than to eat his breakfast?"

"He dare not," answered Ferdinand, boldly. "He may do that with a serf or a vassal, perhaps; but I am neither the one nor the other, and as noble as he is."

All women love daring, and the youth's answer pleased his companion well; yet she could not help jesting him a little upon what she called his pride. "Oh, yes, you're a gentleman born!" she said; "you have made us all know that. But now, Ferdinand, talk a little reason, and don't pretend to say what our lord dare do, or dare not do. He dare do many a thing, and has before now, which perhaps neither I nor you dream of. But in a word, young gentleman--for I must not stop long--I have seen for some time all that is going on here, and would have given a great deal to stop it, but I did not know how; and now it is too late. The only thing to be thought of at present is, what is to come of all this? On my life! my knees shake when I think of it; and I am not apt to be afraid of a little adventure either. What is it that you two propose to do?"

To say the truth, this was a question for which Ferdinand was not at all prepared with an answer. He had laid out, indeed, no distinct plan of action. Youth and love are strange reliers upon circumstances, and he replied simply, "To go on loving, I suppose."

"Oh, that plan will never do," answered Bertha, laughing. "You can't stop there. In the first place, you would neither of you be content to go on loving like a couple of turtles in two separate cages all your lives; and besides, things would soon happen to drive you out of such idleness of love. Any day of the week, any lord may think fit to marry his daughter; and what would she and you do then? I must think of some plan for you, poor things; for I see you are not fit to devise any for yourselves."

"The only plan, my pretty Bertha; to be followed at present," answered Ferdinand, after a moment's thought, "is for you to befriend us, and give us help as far as you can, in whatever circumstances may occur; to let me know everything that happens to your lady that I do not see; and I will take care that you shall know everything that occurs to me, in order that it may be communicated to her. I am sure it is your wish to serve her, Bertha; she loves you dearly, and has

such confidence in you that she told me I might confide in you implicitly."

"I would serve her with my heart's blood," replied the girl, warmly; "though Heaven forbid that I should have to do so," she added, laughing; "for I would a great deal rather have that heart's blood where it is, and see her happy too, poor girl. But, heigho! I don't know how that's to be done, and if I am to be the messenger between you, Master Ferdinand, there will be nothing for it but for you to make love to me; or, at least, to get the people of the castle to think you are so doing."

"Oh, that won't be a very difficult task, Bertha," replied the young man, with a gallant look. "And all we can do is to watch events, and to take advantage of them as they arise--at least till we have further counsel from Father George as to how we ought to act."

"Oh, is Father George in the secret?" cried Bertha, clapping her hands joyfully; "then there is hope. The lord of the abbey against the lord of the castle will always beat in the end. But what says the good Father?"

"He says everything to encourage us," answered Ferdinand, "and, unlike you, fair Bertha, nothing to discourage."

"He knows more than I do," replied Bertha, "more than any of us; and he has some reason, I'll warrant. I wish to Heaven I could see him; but I dare not go down so far, for fear I should be missed. He was with our poor lady in her last hours, and doubtless could tell a tale if he would--well, well, men are strange creatures. I wonder women are such fools as to make themselves their slaves--I'll never marry--not I; for I never yet saw the man that was not as soft as a dormouse while he was courting, and as hard as a hyena when he was married. But there comes old Seckendorf riding up through the wood--I must away, for he's the greatest old tell-tale in the world, with the gossiping tongue of a grandmother, the spite of a monkey, and the heart of a wolf."

"Stay, stay, Bertha," cried the young gentleman. "If we are to seem lovers, you know, it is as well that the old man should see us; and if he catches sight of you walking here with me, without perceiving who it is distinctly, he may fancy it is Adelaide, and make mischief there."

"Ah, you treacherous boy!" cried the gay girl, "that is a true specimen of all men. To shield yourself and your love of the hour you would have all the risk and the blame fall upon me, though Heaven knows I am hazarding enough to serve you. The more faith and truth we poor things have, the more ready are you to sacrifice us. It seems quite natural and right, does it not, that I should, just as an honour and a pleasure, fall into blame with my lord, and seem your light of love to blind him to your mad passion for his daughter."

"But you yourself proposed, I should make the people think that you, Bertha, are the object I am seeking," replied Ferdinand; "and now when I propose to follow that very plan you accuse me of ingratitude, wavering to and fro like an aspen leaf."

"Am I not a woman?" cried Bertha, laughing; "have I not a right to waver? If you are to make love to me, I tell you, I will change fifty times a day; when I pout, you shall call my lips budding roses; when I smile, you shall call my brow, heaven; when I cry, you shall say my eyes are like the April sky. Now, I am not in the humour for being made love to, so I have more than a mind to run away and leave you as a morsel for old Seckendorf's grinders--at least, those he has left."

"Nay, nay, dear Bertha," cried Ferdinand, pressing to her side as he saw the horsemen coming near; "if not for mine, for your sweet mistress's sake, play out the part you have undertaken."

"The mystery must not be a long one, then, Master Ferdinand," answered Bertha; "and, for modesty, keep a little farther off, for although I do not very much mind that people should say I listened to a love story--there being no great harm in that--I would rather they did not think it too warm a one, for women have a character to lose, though men have none worth keeping."

"But then, dear Bertha, it is understood that you will befriend us," said her companion, "and will keep our secret, and give us all sorts of information and advice."

"Aye, aye," answered Bertha, "I must risk putting my hand into the bee-hive and being stung to death, to get you to the honey. I am older than either of you, and ought to know better, but you are two such poor imprudent things, that if I did not help you, one would die of a broken heart, and the other of a broken neck, very soon, so I must even run the risk. But I will have some talk with Father George, very soon, for if he does not give me some assurance and comfort, I shall dream of nothing but being strangled every night. Here they come, here they come; Seckendorf and his gang. Heaven and earth! what have they got all those horses loaded with? they must have been plundering Neustadt. Now, cannot you make me a fine speech, Master Ferdinand, swearing love and eternal constancy, such as you men tickle poor girls' ears with, just to let old Seckendorf see you in the act of protestation?"

"I would give you a kiss, pretty Bertha," replied Ferdinand, gaily, "and that would do better, only you told me not to come near."

"Oh, that would be too close, a great deal," answered Bertha, laughing. "There, he sees us--"

hark! he is calling out to us I will run away as if in a fright, and let him see my face as I go."

She did as she proposed, and in a moment after the old knight came riding along under the battlements calling up to Ferdinand with a loud laugh, "Ha, ha, you young dog, that's what you staid at home for, to chat with pretty Bertha on the walls!"

"No great harm in that, Seckendorf," replied Ferdinand, leaning over to speak to him. "I dare say you have done such a thing before now, yourself; and will do it again many a time. Both she and I like a walk in the free air, better than being stifled in the castle all day long. And why shouldn't we take it together?"

"If that were all, why didn't you go on the side, where folks could see you?" replied the old man, still merry. "No, no, youngster, I am too old a campaigner for that. However, it's no business of mine. We've made a glorious forage. The rogues did not expect to be called upon in such a hurry, so that all the capons were strutting before the door; aye, and geese too. How many geese have we got, Martin?"

"Nineteen, Sir," answered the man; and the old knight was riding on, when Ferdinand called after him, laughing, "Why, that's the number of your troop, Seckendorf!"

The other shook his fist at him good-humouredly enough; for his heart was expanded by the success of his expedition, and to say the truth, Bertha had done him but scanty justice. He was a thorough old German knight of the times--a character which had generally more or less of the reiter in it--as ignorant as a boor of everything but war, brave as a lion, superstitious in a high degree, bloody when enraged or opposed, rapacious as any beast of prey, and holding fast by the old maxim, that anything is justifiable in love or war. Far from thinking the worse, therefore, of Ferdinand, if he had made love to all Adelaide's maids together, he would only have considered it a very laudable method of employing his idle hours, and would never have thought of reporting it to the Count as a matter of blame. He looked upon deceiving a poor girl with tales of love, or beating a boor nearly to death who resisted any unjust demand, as one of the privileges of a soldier and a gentleman, which it was not only just but expedient to exercise from time to time, to keep such rights from falling into desuetude; and after he entered the castle, turning his thoughts to other affairs, he gave no more attention to the proceedings of Bertha and Ferdinand, only jesting the young man for a moment upon his love-making; and declaring that he had shown bad taste, for that Theresa was by far the prettier girl of the two.

"That's because you are as black yourself as one of the andirons," answered Ferdinand, "and therefore you think every fair-faced girl with flaxen hair a perfect beauty. I dare say you've said sweet things enough to Theresa, and, therefore, I wouldn't for the world try to spoil your game, if you won't spoil mine."

"Pooh, nonsense; I've given up love these twenty years," said Seckendorf, "but I won't meddle with your affairs. I wouldn't mar a nice little plot of love for half the lands of Ehrenstein--so go on your own way, I'll not interfere."

"Upon your honour?" asked Ferdinand.

"Upon my knighthood," replied the old man. "So long as you do your duty as a soldier, I not meddle with your love affairs. But on my life, I'm mighty hungry, for I've had nothing but a flagon of wine since I went, and I can never wait till supper-time."

"Do not be afraid," answered Ferdinand, "I made the cook put by for you at dinner, the whole of a roast chine of roebuck, though Metzler and Herman looked at it as if their very eyes would have eaten it. I knew you would come home like a wolf."

"That's a good boy, that's a good boy," answered the old knight, "I won't forget you for that. You shall have the skinning of a fat village some day all to yourself; but I'll go and get the *Rehbraten*, for I could eat my fingers." And away he went, to satisfy his appetite, which was at all times one of the best.

CHAPTER VI.

An hour or two went by, and it was drawing towards night, when Seckendorf, after having appeased the cravings of hunger, was walking up and down the ordinary hall, for want of anything else to do. Indeed, the piping time of peace to a soldier of his stamp was a very dull period, especially at that season of the year, when many of the sports of the field are forbidden; and any little incident that broke the monotony of the castle life was a great relief. There was

nobody in the hall but himself; and he was cursing the slow flight of time, and thinking the Count very long upon the road home, when the lifting of the door latch made him turn his head, and he instantly exclaimed, with a hoarse laugh, "Ha! who are you looking for, Mrs. Bertha? Ferdinand is not here."

"I was looking for you, Sir," answered Bertha, with perfect composure, at the same time walking up to him. "I do not think my lady is at all well," she continued, "she has been moping by herself all day, and says her head aches."

"Ah! that's bad, that's bad," answered Seckendorf: "no one should have a headache but a boy of sixteen who has been drunk overnight. But what can I do, pretty Bertha; I'm no leech, and am more accustomed to bleeding men than bleeding women?"

"Ay, but Sir Knight, you can send down to the chapel, where one of the monks will be found. They all know something of leechcraft; and if Father George is there, he knows a great deal."

"But it's growing dark," said Seckendorf. "The gates must be shut in ten minutes, and we want all the men we have about the place. Better wait till the Count comes back, and if she should be very bad, I'll tell you what you must do; mull half a pint of Zeller wine; put plenty of spice in, and a spoonful or two of honey. Let her drink that down at one draught,--that will cure her. It is just what cured me the only time I ever had a headache."

"Ay, but what would cure you might kill our lady," replied Bertha, who did not at all approve of the prescription. "I pray you, Herr von Seckendorf, send down one of the men to the good Father. What would you say if this were to turn out a fever after you refused to send for help?"

"A fever!" cried Seckendorf, "what has she done to get a fever? She has neither ridden fifty or sixty miles in a hot sun, nor lain out all night in a damp marsh; nor drunk three or four quarts of wine to heat her blood--Well, if I must send, I must; but mind, I do it with no good will, for I don't like to send any of the men out after gates closing."

Thus saying, he put his head out of the door, calling till the whole building echoed again: "Martin, Martin--Martin, I say;" and then returning to Bertha's side, he continued, "I don't think much of the monks. They can't be such holy men as people say, else they'd keep the wood clear of spirits and devils, and things of that kind. Why one of the men, who was looking out from the turret during the storm last night, vows he saw some kind of apparition just down below the chapel, fencing with the lightning, and playing at pitch and toss with balls of fire. Then all in a minute he vanished away.--Ah! Martin, you must go down to the chapel in the wood, and tell the priest to come up and see the lady Adelaide, who is ill; so let him bring his lancet with him."

"Nonsense," cried Bertha, "she will need no bleeding; you soldiers think of nothing but blood."

The man Martin dropped his bead, and did not at all seem to like the task; but then gave a look through the window to the sky and walked away, grumbling something which was neither heard by the old knight nor the young damsel. Bertha having performed her errand, was then tripping away; but Seckendorf caught her hand, saying, in a honied tone, "Stay a bit, my pretty maid, and chat with me, as you did with young Ferdinand this morning."

"No, indeed," cried Bertha, trying to withdraw her hand; "that was in the free air and sunshine, not in a dark hall--let me go, Sir." But the next moment her eyes fixed upon something at the further end of the long room, and giving a loud scream she started back.

Seckendorf let go her hand, and turned round to look in the same direction, where two doors opened into the opposite sides of the hall. Both apparently were closed, but yet, from the one to the other he distinctly perceived a tall shadowy form, clothed in long garments, stalk slowly across, and disappear. The old man who would willingly have confronted a whole host of mortal enemies, and plunged his horse into a forest of spikes, now stood rooted to the ground, with his teeth chattering and his knees shaking, a thousand-fold more terrified than the young girl beside him. Bertha seized the opportunity to hasten away to her mistress's apartments; and Seckendorf, who called after her in vain, thought the line of her retreat by the door behind them so excellent, that he followed as soon as he could regain strength to go.

Never in Seckendorf's life had he so eagerly desired companionship as when he quitted the hall; but companionship he could not find, of the kind and quality that befitted his rank and station. The old ritter would have felt himself degraded by associating with the common soldiers, or anybody who had not von before his name; but Ferdinand he could not find; his companion, old Karl von Mosbach, had accompanied the Count, with all the other persons of gentle birth who filled the various anomalous offices which then existed in the household of a high nobleman; and not even a crossbow-man, who, as was generally admitted, had a right to sit down to table with a knight, could be discovered by our worthy friend, as he went grumbling through the castle.

"Hundert Schwerin!" he exclaimed; "to think of my seeing the ghost! Santa Maria! who'd have ever fancied it would have come into the hall? It looked to me, mighty like our poor dear lady that's gone, only it had a long beard, and was six foot high. I wonder if our good lord did put her out of the way, as some people think!--What could it want in the hall? Very saucy of an apparition to show itself there, unless it were at meal times, when, poor thing! it might want something to eat and drink. It must be cold and hungry work to go shivering about all night in vaults and

passages, and to sneak back to its hiding-hole at daylight. I'd rather stand sentry on the northern't tower in the middle of January. I wonder if I shall ever be a ghost! I should not like it at all. I'll have this one laid, however, if it costs me five crowns out of my own pocket; for we shan't be safe in our rooms, if it goes on in this way, unless we huddle up five or six together, like young pigs in a sty. Donner! where can that young dog, Ferdinand, be? I won't tell him what I've seen, for he'll only laugh; but I'll call him to talk about the Lady Adelaide; he's very fond of her, and will like to hear about her being ill;" and, raising his voice, with these friendly intentions, he called up the stairs which led to the young gentleman's room,--"Ferdinand! Ferdinand!--I want you, scapegrace!"

"What is it, ritter?" answered the voice of Ferdinand from above; "I'm busy, just now; I'll come in a minute."

"But I want you now," answered Seckendorf, who was determined not to be left longer without society than was necessary;--"Come hither and speak to me, or I will come to you."

Ferdinand said a word or two to some one above, and then came unwillingly down the stairs.

"Ah, wild one!" said the old knight, "what would you have given to be in my place just now? I've had a chat with pretty mistress Bertha, just between light and dark, in the hall."

"Indeed!" answered Ferdinand. "I dare say it was very innocent, Seckendorf; and so was my chat with her on the battlements. But what might she want with you?"

"Why, the Lady Adelaide is very ill," replied Seckendorf.

"Ill!" exclaimed Ferdinand, in a tone of much alarm. "What, the Lady Adelaide! She seemed quite well this morning."

"Ay, but women change like the wind," said Seckendorf; "and she's ill now, however; so I've sent down to the chapel for the priest to come up and say what's to be done for her."

"Why, Father George is in my room now," replied Ferdinand, "giving me good counsel and advice."

"Send him down, then,--send him down, quick," said Seckendorf; "and then come and talk with me: I've a good deal to say."

Ferdinand sped away with a much more rapid step than that which had brought him thither, and returned in a few seconds with the good priest, whose face, as far as Seckendorf could see it, in the increasing darkness, expressed much less alarm than that which the lover's countenance had displayed.

"'Tis nothing,--'tis nothing," he said, after speaking with the old knight for a moment, on the lady's illness; "some trifle that will soon pass. But I will go and see;" and, accompanied by Ferdinand and the old soldier as far as the door of Adelaide's apartments, he went in without ceremony.

While he remained,--and he staid for more than an hour, Ferdinand and Seckendorf continued walking up and down the corridor, and only went beyond it to order the hall and the passages to be lighted. Their conversation was entirely of the Lady Adelaide and her illness; for though, with the invariable garrulity of one who had seen a marvel, Seckendorf more than a dozen times approached the subject of the apparition, ready to pour the whole tale into Ferdinand's ear, notwithstanding all his resolutions to the contrary, the young man was still more occupied with the thoughts of his fair lady's state, than the old knight with the memory of the ghost, and he ever turned back to that topic just when the whole history was about to be related. Then Seckendorf would discourse learnedly upon calentures and fevers, hot and cold, describe the humours that ferment in man's blood, and tell what are the vapours that rise from their fermentation; shake his head and declare that it was a wondrous pity young girls should be so given phthisick, which often carried them off in the flower of their age, and the lustre of their beauty; and, shaking his head when he pronounced Adelaide's name, would declare that she looked sadly frail of late, doubting whether she would last another winter. But as all this--though it served to torment in a terrible manner the heart of the young lover--would probably not prove very entertaining to the reader, we will pass over the further particulars till the good father's return. By this time, to Seckendorf's great comfort and consolation, there was as much light shed through the corridor, from a great crescent at one end and a lantern at the other, as the passages of the castle ever displayed. It was not very brilliant, indeed, but sufficiently so to show that Father George's countenance was perfectly cheerful and calm; and in answer to the eager questions of Ferdinand, and the less anxious inquiries of the old knight, he said,--"Oh, the lady is better; 'tis but a little passing cloud, and she will be as well as ever ere the morning."

"Have you let her blood?" asked Seckendorf.

"Nay, no need of that," answered Father George. "Her illness came but from some melancholy fumes, rising from the heart to the head. That I have remedied, and she is better already,--but I must hasten back, for I may be needed at the chapel."

"Stay, stay, good father," cried the old knight; "I have something to ask of you. I will go with you to the gate;" and walking on with Father George, he entertained him with an account of the apparition he had seen in the hall, and besought him to take the most canonical means of laying the unwelcome visitant, by the heels, in the Red Sea; or if that could not be done for a matter of five or ten crowns, at least to put up such prayers on his behalf, as would secure him against any farther personal acquaintance with it.

Father George smiled quietly at the old knight's tale, and assured him he would do his best in the case, after due consideration. Then, hastening away, he passed down the hill, and just reached the door of his temporary dwelling, when the sound of many horses' feet, coming up from below, announced the return of the Count to Ehrenstein. Father George, however, did not wait to salute the nobleman as he passed, or to communicate to him the fact of his daughter's illness, but entered his little cell, and closing the door listened for a moment or two as the long train passed by, and then lighted his lamp.

In the mean time the Count rode on, with somewhat jaded horses, and at a slow pace, looking to the right and left, through the dim obscurity of the night, as if he, too, were not altogether without apprehensions of some terrible sight presenting itself. More than once he struck his horse suddenly with the spur, and not one word did he interchange with any of his followers, from the time he crossed the bridge till he arrived at the Castle gates. He was met under the archway by Seckendorf and Ferdinand, the *Schlossvogt*, or castle bailiff, and two or three of the guard. But he noticed no one except the old knight, whom he took by the arm, and walked on with him into the hall.

"What news, Seckendorf?" he said. "Has anything happened since I went?"

"Ay, two or three things, my lord," replied Seckendorf. "In the first place, the lady Adelaide has been ill, headachy, and drooping, like a sick falcon."

"Pooh! some woman's ailment, that will be gone to-morrow," replied the Count.

"Ay, so says Father George, whom I sent for, to see her," answered Seckendorf. And finding that his lord paid very little attention to the state of his daughter's health, he went on to give him an account of his foraging expedition in the morning, dwelling long and minutely upon the number of ducks, capons, geese, sheep, and lambs, which he had obtained, and dilating somewhat at large upon his conversation with sundry retainers and vassals of the Count whom he had summoned in the course of his ride to present themselves at the castle on the following day.

Such details of all that was said by the peasantry were usually very much desired by the Count, whose jealous and suspicious disposition made him eager to glean every little indication of the feelings and sentiments of the people towards him, but on the present occasion Seckendorf's long-winded narrative seemed to weary and irritate him, and after many not very complimentary interjections, he stopped him, saying, "There, there, that will do; there will be enough, doubtless, both of geese and asses, capons and boors;" and he remained standing with his eyes fixed upon the ground, in thought.

"I fear, my good lord," said the bluff old soldier, who generally took the liberty of saying what he liked, "that you have not been very successful in your expedition; for you seem to have come home in a mighty ill humour--I suppose the money isn't so much as you expected."

"No, no; it is not that," answered the Count, "I never expected any till this morning, so it is all pure gain, and a good large sum too, when it arrives. Heaven send it come safe! for Count Frederick has not brought it with him, but trusted it to some of the lazy merchants of Pisa.--No, no, it isn't that, Seckendorf. But there are things I love not about this place. By Heaven! I have a great mind to take a torch, set fire to yon old rafters, and burn the whole of it to the ground."

"Better do that to your enemy's mansion than your own," answered Seckendorf, drily, and a good deal surprised at his lord's vehemence.

"Ay, but my enemy has a house that won't burn," answered the Count. "You can't burn the grave, Seckendorf,--that's a vain effort. What I mean is, that these stories of spirits and unearthly beings wandering here and there around us, oppress me, Seckendorf. Why should I call them stories? Have I not seen? Do I not know?"

"Ay, and I have seen, too," answered Seckendorf; "but I never knew you had, my good lord."

"Why, this very night," continued the Count, grasping his arm tight, and speaking in a low tone, "as I came through the woods, wherever I turned my eyes, I saw nought but dim figures, flitting about amongst the trees; none distinct enough to trace either form or feature, but still sufficiently clear to show that the tale of the peasants and the women is but too true--."

"Peasants and women, Sir!" cried Seckendorf. "Knights and soldiers, too, if you please. Why, within the last two months, ghosts have been as plenty in the castle as holly berries on the hills. 'Tis but this very night, that, as I stood talking to Bertha about her lady's illness, here where we now stand--just in the twilight, between day and night--a tall, lank figure, in long, thin, flowing robes,--it might be in a shroud, for ought I know--crossed from that door to that, and disappeared. We both of us saw it, for her scream made me turn round. So you see the very hall itself is not

safe. There should always be a tankard of red wine standing here--for I've heard that spirits will not come near red wine."

"Methinks we should soon find plenty of ghosts to drink it," answered the Count, with a bitter laugh. "But it is very strange. I have done nought to merit this visitation."

"Something must be done to remedy it, my good lord," replied Seckendorf, "that is clear, or they will drive us out of this hall as they drove us out of the old one--That's to say, I suppose it was the ghosts drove us out of that; for though you did not say why you left it, all men suspected you had seen something."

The Count took a step or two backwards and forwards in the room, and then pausing opposite to Seckendorf, he replied, "No, my good friend, I saw nought there but in fancy. Yet was the fancy very strong! Each time I stood in that hall alone, it seemed as if my brother came and stood beside me; walked as I walked; and when I sat, placed himself opposite, glaring at me with the cold glassy eyes of death. It was fancy--I know it was fancy; for once I chased the phantom back against the bare cold wall, and there it disappeared; but yet the next night it was there again.--Why should it thus torment me," he continued vehemently. "I slew him not; I ordered no one to slay him; I have done him no wrong." And he walked quickly up and down the room again, while Seckendorf followed more slowly, repeating,

"Well, my good lord, it's clear something must be tried to stop this, or we shan't get soldiers to stay in the castle. The rascals don't mind fighting anything of flesh and blood, but they are not fond of meeting with a thing when they don't know what it is. So I thought it the best way to speak with Father George about it, and ask him to lay my ghost--I've had enough of it, and don't wish to see such a thing any more."

"You did wrong--you did wrong, Seckendorf," answered his lord. "I do not wish these monks to meddle, they will soon be fancying that some great crime has been committed, and putting us all to penance, if not worse. We must find means to lay the ghost ourselves--spirit or devil, or whatever it may be."

"Well, then, my good lord, the only way is to laugh at it," answered Seckendorf. "I dare say one may become familiar with it in time, though it's ugly enough at first. One gets accustomed to everything, and why not to a ghost? We'll jest at him; and if he comes near me, I'll throw the stool at his head, and see if that will lay him--I am very sorry I spoke to Father George, if it displeases you; but, however, there's not much harm done, for the grey gowns of the abbey know everything that goes on; and the devil himself can't conceal his game from them."

"Too much, too much," answered the Count; "they're the pests of the land, prying and spying, and holding their betters in subjection. We are but the vassals of these monks, Seckendorf; and if I had my will, I'd burn their rookery about their ears."

"Ah, here comes Karl von Mosbach," cried Seckendorf, glad to escape giving an answer to his lord's diatribe against the monks, for whom he retained all the superstitious veneration of an earlier period. "Ay, and the Lady Adelaide, too! Why, bless your beautiful eyes, yon girl there told me you were ill, fair lady!"

"I have been somewhat indisposed, but I am well again now," answered Adelaide, advancing to her father. The Count, however, took little notice of her, calling Bertha to him, and making her give an account of what she and Seckendorf had seen.

"Fancy, fancy, my dear father," cried Adelaide, when the girl had done, laughing much more joyously than was her wont. "These tales are told and listened to, till the eyes become accomplices of the imagination, and both combine to cheat us. Bertha came down in the grey twilight, to say that I was ill; and I will warrant, went trembling along the dark passages, and taking every suit of armour, and every shadow through the window, of soldier or of warder passing without, for a grim spirit in a shroud."

"Nay, nay, dear lady," cried Bertha, and was about to defend herself, but the Count cut her short, turning to his daughter with a smile, and saying, "So these tales have not infected your fancy, Adelaide. You have no fears of ghosts or spirits?"

"Not I, indeed," answered the lady. "First, because I have never seen them, and next, because I know they would not hurt me, if I did. If they be unsubstantial they cannot harm me; and if I be innocent, they would not seek to do so, if they could. I fear them not, my father, and I only pray, if any are seen more, I may be called to behold them too."

The fair girl spoke more boldly and more lightly than she usually did, and through the rest of the evening the same cheerful spirit did not leave her. Seated with her father at the last meal of the day, she cheered him with conversation, and asked many a question regarding Count Frederick of Leiningen, and those he brought in his train.

"There is none that will fit thee for a husband, I fear, my child," replied the Count who for the time had caught a portion of his daughter's gaiety. "They are all bluff old soldiers, like Seckendorf or Mosbach there. Even his very jester is white-headed, and his dwarf like a withered pippin."

"Methinks it would not be easy to jest if one were old," said Adelaide. "Gravity and age, I have always thought twin sisters."

"No, no," replied the Count, "that is because you know nought of the world, dear girl. Why Count Frederick himself is just the same gay, joyous soul as ever, and is as old as I am, or a year older. Now, I dare say, to your young eyes, I seem to have reached a vast antiquity, for it is only in looking back that space seems short. It appears but yesterday that I was a boy."

"Nay, I do not think you so very old," replied his daughter, smiling, "when I set you against Seckendorf, you seem but a youth."

"But when you compare me with Ferdinand," replied her father, laughing, "I am quite an old man. Is it not so, child?"

Adelaide neither answered nor coloured, as might have been perhaps expected, but smiled faintly and fell into thought; for it is wonderful what a vast chain of associations is very often spread out before the mind, by a few very simple words; and those associations are nine times out of ten totally different from any that the speaker intended to awaken.

It was so in this case. The comparison of her lover's light and active youth, with the gay rose upon the cheek, the glossy unchanged hair, the movements full of elastic life, the eye lighted up with that heart's fire, which, like the watcher's lamp, grows slowly dimmer with each passing hour, and her pale, thoughtful father, with his stern look, his rigid air, his hair thickly scattered with the snow of time, went on to take in the two elder men where the progress of decay had passed its first stage; and at each step her fancy halted to ask, "And will he whom I love soon be like this--and this?" Her father had said, it seemed but yesterday that he was a boy; and Adelaide thought, "It may be but to-morrow ere I look back upon these days and feel the same." From time to time a sudden consciousness of the great truth, that mortal life is but a point amidst eternity, seems to burst upon us and is then lost again--the whisper of an angel drowned in the tumult of earthly hopes and fears.

Before she had roused herself from her reverie, Seckendorf had taken up the conversation, saying, "And so, my good lord, Count Frederick is as gay and jovial as ever? I remember you and him, and the late Count, your brother, all curly headed boys together--two merry ones and one grave one; for you were always more serious than the rest."

"Because I had less cause for merriment," replied the Count, with a cloud coming over his brow. "They wanted to make a priest of me at that time, Seckendorf; and it was not to my taste--But do not let us talk of those days. The past is always a sad subject. You will see our friend to-morrow; for he will be here ere nightfall, and may stop a week or more, so that we must have all things prepared. The great hall, too, must be made ready; for we shall not have room here. The casements must be mended early to-morrow; and the dust cleaned off the walls and banners."

Seckendorf did not answer, but looked at the Count stedfastly, with an inquiring air, in reply to which his lord nodded, saying, "It must be done."

"By my faith! my good lord," cried Karl von Mosbach, "you won't get many people willing to do it; for every one says that the hall is haunted; and we love not even passing by the door."

"We will have it sprinkled with holy water," replied the Count, somewhat bitterly; "but do not tell me that any of my men will refuse to obey my orders, or I will shame you all by a girl."

There was no reply; and the Count demanded angrily, addressing himself to none in particular, "Are you afraid? Here, Adelaide, will you undertake to deck the hall with flowers, and strew the floor with rushes?"

"Willingly, willingly, my dear father," answered the fair girl; "and you shall see how gaily I will trick it out."

"I beseech you, my lord, to pardon me," said Ferdinand, "but I am not afraid at all to obey anything that you command; and I can very well spare the Lady Adelaide the trouble in the hall; if she will but wreath the garlands for me."

"You have a heart of steel, good youth," replied the Count; "what if I tell you now to go and bring me the banner which hangs between the shields at the farther end of the hall?"

"I will do it at once, my lord," replied Ferdinand, rising.

The Count fixed his eyes upon him, and Adelaide also gazed at him earnestly. The young man's cheek might lose a shade of colour; but still he seemed perfectly willing; and his lord nodded, saying, "Go!"

"I must take a light, or I may not be able to get down the banner," replied Ferdinand.

"The moon shines clear through the casements," answered the Count. "You will need no other light."

The young man made no reply, but drew his sword-belt a little forward and walked calmly to

the door. One or two of the men followed him out of the room; not with the intention of accompanying him; for none of them very much liked the task, but merely with the idle curiosity of seeing him cross the passages and enter the hall. In a minute or two they returned; and one of them said, "He has got in, my lord, but whether he will come out again, I can't tell."

"Got in!" repeated the Count, "What do you mean, Ernst?"

"Why, we watched him from the stone steps," replied the soldier, "and he lifted the latch and shook the door, but at first it would not open. After a while, however, it was suddenly flung back, and in he went."

"Did he close it behind him?" asked the Count, and Adelaide gazed anxiously on the man's face, in expectation of his answer.

"Some one did," replied the soldier, "but I can't tell whether it was he or not."

Thus saying he took his seat again at the table, and all remained silent for several minutes, waiting with different degrees of anxiety for the result.

"The boy is mad," murmured Seckendorf, to himself, after two or three more minutes had elapsed; and then he added aloud, "Hundred thousand! we must not leave this lad to be strangled by the ghosts, or devils, or whatever they are, my lord."

"I will go myself," replied the Count, rising from the table; "let those who will, follow me."

"Stay, let us get some torches," cried Karl von Mosbach.

But just at that moment there was a clang which shook the whole castle; and while the party assembled gazed on each other's faces in doubt and consternation, the door of the hall in which they were was thrown quickly open, and Ferdinand entered bearing a banner in his hand. His face was very pale; but his brow was stern and contracted, and advancing direct towards the Count, who had come down from the step on which his table was raised, he laid the banner before him.

His lord gazed from the banner to his face, and from his face back to the banner, which was torn and soiled, and stained in many places with blood. "How is this?" he exclaimed, at length. "This is not what I sent you for!"

"This is the banner, my lord," replied Ferdinand; "which was hanging between the two shields at the farther end of the hall, over your chair of state."

Old Seckendorf bent down over the tattered silk, on which was embroidered a lion with its paw upon a crescent; and as he did so, he murmured, with a shake of the head, "Your brother's banner, Sir, which he carried with him to the East."

"What have you seen?" demanded the Count, sinking his voice, and fixing his eyes upon the young man's countenance.

"Not now, my lord," replied Ferdinand, in the same low tone; "another time, when you are alone, and have leisure."

The Count made no reply, but seated himself at the table, and leaned his head thoughtfully upon his hand for a moment or two, while the rest of the party remained in groups around, some gazing from a distance at the banner, some looking at it more closely, but none speaking in a louder tone than a low whisper. It was not, indeed, that they were kept silent by any ceremonious respect for their lord; for those were days of much homely freedom of demeanour; and that distance and reserve did not exist between a chief and his followers which a higher and more fastidious state of civilization has introduced. But there was a feeling of awe approaching to terror, in the bosoms of all, which oppressed them in their speech. Each asked himself, what could this mysterious event mean? how had the banner come where it was found? what did it all portend? for none, in those days of superstition, doubted that the event which had just taken place was an omen of others yet to come. The pale cheek with which Ferdinand of Altenburg had returned, too, and his grave stern look, as he stood by the table where he had lately been sitting, attracted observation, and led every one to believe that there was more to be told, though they had not heard his reply to their lord's question.

At length, however, to the surprise of all, the Count suddenly shook off his gloomy and abstracted look, and pushed across the flagon of choice wine, which stood at his right, to his young follower, saying, with a laugh, "Come, drink a cup of wine to me, Ferdinand the ghost-queller. By the Lord! there is not a braver man amongst us than thou art, boy. Would to Heaven! that all here would follow thine example. I, for one, will do so, and think no more of these strange things than if they were but the whisperings of the wind through the trees. Drink, good youth! drink."

Ferdinand filled a cup and drank to his lord; and the next moment the Count rose again, exclaiming, "Now, to bed, to bed, we must all be up by cock-crow for our preparations. I will sup in the old hall to-morrow, if all the devils on the earth or under it should be its tenants;" and thus

saying he left the room, followed quickly by Ferdinand, who did not choose to undergo the questionings of his comrades. The others remained for a few minutes, shaking the wise head and commenting gravely; and then by threes and fours quitted the hall, and retired to rest; but there was much oil burned in the Castle of Ehrenstein that night.

CHAPTER VII.

The Count of Ehrenstein tossed uneasily on his bed, in that state between sleeping and waking, when the mind neither enjoys quiet repose, nor yet lives as an active being dissevered from the body, in continuous and regular dreams--when scattered and disjointed fragments of visions cross the imagination--when voices call and suddenly sink away from the ear--when figures appear for an instant, and are lost before we can accurately see what they are. Often his bosom heaved and panted, as if oppressed with some terrible load. Often murmured words and smothered cries broke low and indistinctly from his lips. Often the eyeballs would roll under their filmy curtain, as if some sight of horror presented itself to fancy.

At length the grey light of day streamed through the narrow window, and fell upon the sleeping man's countenance; and then having turned for a moment from side to side, he started up and gazed towards the casement, with a bewildered look, as if he knew not where he was. After leaning his head upon his hand, and apparently thinking deeply for several minutes, he rose and dressed himself without aid. Then walking to the little dark anteroom, in which two of his attendants, or *knechts*, were sleeping, he drew back the bolt of the door--for his was not a heart without suspicion--and stirred one of the men with his foot, as he lay upon the ground, bidding him go and tell Ferdinand of Altenburg to come down upon the eastern rampart immediately. Having given these orders, he himself issued forth, and walked slowly up and down, now casting his eyes upon the stones beneath his feet, now gazing at the rising sun. But few minutes had elapsed, however, ere Ferdinand was at his side, and the Count turned towards him, saying, "What! up so early? You should have no dreams, young man, to break your rest."

"Nay, my lord," replied Ferdinand, "every one dreams, I suppose. Have you been disturbed?"

"That have I," answered the Count. "I have seldom passed a more troublous night, and yet I was weary, too, when I went to rest."

"Were they good or evil visions, my lord," asked the young man. "Mine were all bright."

"Would that mine had been so!" answered the Count. "But they were wild and whirling things, and 'tis no matter--and yet these undigested thoughts," he continued, after a short pause, "these fanciful nothings of the dreaming brain, trouble us as much at the time as fierce realities--nay, perhaps more. I have suffered more bitterly, at times, in some dark vision of the night--yes, even in my corporeal frame,--than even choking death itself could inflict. I cannot but think that there is a land to which the spirits of the sleeping travel for a time, and undergo a strange and wayward fate, till they are called back again. I've often fancied there must be such a place: a kingdom of dreams, as it were, to which all the strange actions and thoughts of the world are sent as soon as done, as a sort of commodity or merchandise, and there are mingled up by some fantastic power with the productions of the land itself. There go the images of the dead, the voices that are lost upon the earth, the passionate loves and follies of our youth, the thirsty ambition of our manhood, the crimes and the temptations of all years, even the very thoughts of infancy, and there we find them all, when the spirit is summoned from the slumbering body to visit that strange country. Else, how is it, that when we lie with darkness all around us, no sight, no sound, no scent, to wake up memory, things long forgotten, faces that no effort of the waking mind could call before the eye of fancy, voices that have long ceased to ring in the deafened ear of forgetfulness, come upon us, all strong and vivid as reality; ay, even the feelings also no longer suited to our state of being, totally dissonant to the condition of our corporeal frame or to our mental age:--such as the joys and pastimes of our early boyhood, and the prattled pleasures of our baby days? Yet there they all are--bright as if in life, though strangely mixed with other wilder things, and cast into mad impossible array. Last night it seemed as if every action of my life, charmed by some frantic Orpheus, danced around me in wild and grotesque forms--never pausing till I had leisure to taste one joy, or power to resist one pang. Would to Heaven! I could be a boy again, and, with the knowledge of each act's results, live over life anew--It would be a very different one!"

Ferdinand had let him proceed without observation or question; indeed he was too much surprised to answer, for he had never before heard the Count speak thus to any one. It seemed, in truth, more as if he were talking to himself than to his companion; as if the weight of thought overpowered him, and he cast down the burden where he could. But the young man's surprise

was not less excited by the matter of the confidence, than by the confidence itself. He knew the Count was learned far beyond most of the nobles of his day. He knew that he was thoughtful; but he had ever seemed in disposition, worldly, grasping, avaricious; evil qualities, as he thought, perfectly incompatible with fancy. In his inexperience of the world, he was not aware how frequently habits of thought and of desire often produced in us by the operation of a long train of ruling circumstances--overbear the natural bent of the mind, and lead us to a course of life, and to innumerable actions, utterly inharmonious with the original tone of the character. It is so; and there is scarcely any man who is not thus walled in by circumstances in his course; scarcely any tree that, however upright its original shoot, is not bent by the prevailing wind. Nevertheless, when the mind is left free for a moment from the habitual influences,--when the passions that have been indulged are not called into play,--when the desires that have usurped a sway over us, are for a time without either object or opposition, the original character of the mind is suffered to indulge itself for a brief space, like a prisoner allowed a few moments of free air. So was it with the Count of Ehrenstein. Busy with the thoughts which had succeeded to his dreams, he forgot not only his motives for sending for the young man at his side, but also his habitual reserve; and led from one feeling to another, as he discoursed imaginatively of the visions of the night, he was hurried on to admit those sensations of regret which, sooner or later, visit every one of Adam's race, but which the pride that entered in us at the Fall forbids us to acknowledge.

Ferdinand had walked on by his side, thoughtful and interested, with his eyes, too, bent down upon the pavement of the rampart, and eager to hear more. But soon after the Count paused, the young man brought the confession, if it may be so called, to a conclusion, by asking a question which would naturally rise in any simple and straightforward heart, saying,--"Is it not very easy to repair, my lord, that which has been done amiss?"

"No, no, youth," answered the Count, turning upon him, and speaking almost bitterly, "that is a foolish error. It is never possible to repair aught that has been done amiss. Each act, once performed, is irrevocable. It is more,--it is a foundation-stone upon which, under the lash of the stern taskmaster, Fate, we must, whether we will or not, build up a part of the fabric of our life. Now do not go, silly boy! and from what I have said raise up in your fanciful brain a belief that I have committed great crimes, and bitterly repent them. It is with me as with all men who have power to think, and who try from the past to extract guidance for the future. I see small errors producing greater evils; I see pitiful mistakes, which were thought nothing at first, swelling with bitter consequences,--but nothing more. Every man, Ferdinand," and he laid his hand upon his shoulder with a sort of monitory gesture, "every man who has passed through a great part of life, is like one who has climbed a mountain and is destined to descend on the other side. If he turns round to look at the country he has travelled, he sees it spread forth beneath him, with all its roads and passes, rivers and valleys, laid out as in a map, and he will ever find he has often lost his way; that there were paths which would have led him to his object shorter than those he has taken; that the objects on which he has fixed his eyes to guide him on, were often wide of the right course; and, in a word, that he has not accomplished, in the summer day of life, one-half he might have done, with less labour, and by easier means. And now let us speak of other things. You would not say last night what you had seen in the old hall; now tell me what befell you there. We were then in the hour of fanciful conceits, when the imagination wanders and easily receives false impressions. We are now in the broad light of the real day, and you can better tell, and I can better understand whatever you may have witnessed there."

"I did not wish to speak last night, my lord," replied Ferdinand, in a clam and easy tone, "because all the people about us have filled themselves with fears which would be quite as well away; and all I had to say would only have made them more afraid. I went straight to the hall as you directed--I do not mean to say that I would not rather have had a light--but neither flesh nor spirit shall turn me from doing what I have undertaken to perform. I found the door fastened, however, and after having lifted the latch, I shook it hard, but it did not give way. For a minute, I thought of coming back to tell you; but then I fancied that you and the rest might doubt me, and I tried again. Just then I think I heard a heavy grating sound, but, however, the door opened, and I went in. At first I could hardly see--"

"Why, the moon shone, and must have given plenty of light through the windows," replied the Count.

"There was too much light, my good lord," answered Ferdinand. "I came out of the dark vestibule, and when I entered the hall, it was all in a blaze of light. The suits of old armour that stand against the wall had, each one, a gauntleted hand extended, and in it was a torch. It seemed, indeed, that there were more suits than usual, but I did not stay to count them, for as soon as I could see, I hurried on, passing the table where they were seated--"

"Who?" exclaimed the Count, "who were seated?"

"Nay, my lord, I cannot tell you," answered Ferdinand. "Some six or eight tall figures, each wrapped in a strange garment like a shroud, dusty and soiled; as if they had lain long in the earth, covering the head, and falling down to the eyes. My heart felt very heavy, and beat fast, and I dared not look narrowly at them. But I drew my sword, and hurried on, mounting into the great chair to reach the banner; when, just as I laid my hand upon it, the voices of those round the table said, 'Health to the Count of Ehrenstein! health to the living dead!' and looking round, I saw that they had cups raised high, as if they were pursuing their unearthly wassail without seeing or noticing my presence. I felt somewhat faint and sick, but I tore down the banner,

breaking, I fear, the rest that held it, and hurried out as fast as I could go. As I paused to take breath, I heard a loud clang behind, but what it was I do not know."

"We will see, we will see," said the Count, sternly; "six or eight, did you say?"

"Ay, my good lord, at the least," replied Ferdinand.

"Can there be some trick in this?" rejoined the Count, and fell into a fit of deep thought, which occupied him for several minutes. "And yet all the men were in the hall," he continued, evidently showing which way his suspicions turned. "I marked the absence of none, except the horse boys."

"They would not dare, my lord," replied Ferdinand. "There is scarce a man in the whole castle would venture thither in the broad day, and surely none at night."

"True, true," rejoined the Count, "but yet they shall venture thither if I live till supper time. What could this clang be that followed your coming out? We all heard it, even at that distance."

"I shall soon see, my lord, if it have left any trace behind it, for should you hold your intention of feasting in the hall to-night, they shall not stop me from decking it forth as I have promised."

"You seem right willing to venture with these ghosts," said the Count, with his habitual sharp suspicion.

"They have done me no harm as yet, my lord," answered Ferdinand boldly, well understanding what was passing in the Count's mind. "When you have seen some such sight yourself, you will believe, but, doubtless, not till then. I would not myself unless I had seen."

"Well, I will try," replied the Count. "Come with me now, and perhaps we may discover what was the cause of this clatter, which shook the whole castle as you were returning."

He spoke somewhat scornfully, and Ferdinand made no reply, but followed as his lord led on, with hasty strides, as if either impatient to see the state of the hall with his own eyes, or fearful that his resolution would fail before his intention was fulfilled.

On their way they passed through the lesser hall, where their meals were now usually taken, and thence through a long stone passage, which crossed the entrance from the great gates, down a broad flight of steps, and into the vestibule by one of the smaller doors opposite to that the great hall. There the Count paused for a moment, as if he hesitated, then putting his hand upon the latch, he lifted it, and flung back the ponderous mass of wood-work, which yielded at once to his hand. With an eager and straining gaze, his eye ran round the wide vaulted chamber, which was vacant of every living thing; but still the sight that it presented offered strange confirmation of the tale which Ferdinand had told. The twelve suits of old armour, no longer in the mode and fashion of the time, which had been for many years ranged along the wall opposite to the windows, upon wooden standards that kept them in an erect position, were now cast prone upon the pavement, and the lances, swords, and axes, which had been arranged in fanciful devices, between them, were likewise strewn upon the ground as if they had been flung down at once by an earthquake. The old banners remained waving overhead, but that which had formerly hung over the chair of state, and which the Count had sent Ferdinand to fetch on the preceding night, was no longer to be seen. The chair which had been the only piece of furniture left in the hall, stood there still, with its cushion of crimson velvet, affording a strange contrast to the air of desolation presented by the whole of the rest of the scene; the broken casements, the mouldering banners, the rusty suits of armour cast down, and the disjointed pavement, with the green grass growing up between the crevices of the stone.

The Count took a step across the threshold, and then stopped short, repeating several times, "This is very strange!" To have supposed that Ferdinand himself had cast the armour down, was out of the question, for it would have taken him half an hour to do it, and the first impression upon the Count's mind was evidently one of awe, if not of terror. But still there seemed to be doubts, or else he thought fit to assume them to cover the emotions which he really felt; for after remaining for several minutes in the same position, he turned suddenly round to his young companion, inquiring, "Where sat these things you saw? Here is neither board nor bench, for them to hold their revels."

Ferdinand's face was very grave, and even sad, but he replied at once, walking some ten paces forward, to a spot on the left-hand side of the hall; "Here they were seated, my lord, or appeared to be so."

The Count followed him, and gazed upon the ground. "They have left no traces of their presence," he said, at length, and then looking up to the vacant space where his banner had formerly hung, he asked, "And did you really take that thing you brought me from that place. The rest does not seem broken."

"I thought I heard it break, my lord," replied the young man, walking on towards the chair; but then, stopping as he came up to it, he said, "Here are the marks of my feet, my lord, in the dust upon the cushion."

"Well, well, I do not doubt you," said the Count, who had followed; and then crossing his arms

upon his chest, he fell into thought again, from which he did not rouse himself for a long time. In the end he exclaimed, with a start, "He shall not drive me hence--I have done him no wrong," and with a slow pace he trod his way back towards the door. "There, that will do," he continued, as Ferdinand followed him out; "I do not want you more; say nothing of what has happened to any one; and go fly your hawk, or wheel your horse till breakfast time; I will speak to you further afterwards."

When the hour of breakfast came, and the household were assembled in the hall, the Count again called Ferdinand up to his own table, and seemed to regard him with much more favour than he had ever done before; but the young man remarked that his lord's eye wandered round the chamber in which they sat, and then rested on the groups of his followers and attendants, as if calculating whether, with the numbers which were to be added that day to the party there assembled, the hall where they then were would contain them all. A fairer object of contemplation, indeed, was before the young man's eyes, for he was seated opposite to the Lady Adelaide, on Seckendorf's left hand. She was a little paler, perhaps, than on the preceding morning, but that was the only trace which her temporary sickness seemed to have left. She was more than commonly gay; indeed, though there was a thoughtful and a feeling tone mingled with her cheerfulness, making it like the song of a lark, in which, though blithe and happy on the whole, may be heard sad minor tones by any ear that listens for them.

When the meal was over, the Count rose, saying, "Come with me, Ferdinand. Come hither, Adelaide;" and walking forth, he led the way to the corridor above, into which the different apartments occupied by himself, his daughter, and the maids, opened either directly, or through their several anterooms. There, after taking a turn backwards and forwards, he turned to his two young companions, who had followed, speaking with their looks, and said, "To you two I must trust the arrangement of the great hall for our guests this evening. It is vain to ask these dastardly men below, who are frightened at mere shadows; and the other hall will not hold one-half--that is clear enough."

"Oh, ask them not, my dear father," answered Adelaide. "I and Ferdinand can do it all, and we have no fears."

"Good faith! dear lady," rejoined Ferdinand, "though I fear not, yet I somewhat doubt whether unaided we can accomplish all, at least in time. The armour has somehow fallen down, many of the lozenges of glass require to be replaced, and, in truth, I hardly know how I am to manage that. All the rest we might accomplish easily enough."

"That shall be done for you," said the Count, "if you and Adelaide can do the rest. I would not have my jesting friend and his gay followers come hither, and say, that they found the Castle of Ehrenstein in ruins, and its banquet hall as if it never saw a feast. Do the best you can to give it some air of cheerfulness, wreath the crescents and corbels with flowers--there are many in the woods just now--and with green branches; strew the pavement over thickly with rushes, so that no flaws be seen. As I go, I will send one to repair the casements who would beard the devil himself."

"He must come from far, my lord," answered Ferdinand, "for all the people near have got this tale. I first heard it down at the Abbey; and not one of the people of the village, I believe, would come up to save his soul."

"Not very far either," replied the Count; "within a mile of the Abbey, on the other side. You know Franz Creussen, the great blacksmith? He'll not fear, I warrant. Why look you so surprised, youth?"

"Because, my lord, I one day heard you threaten to split his skull," said Ferdinand, "when he refused to shoe your horses; and certainly he never showed you any great reverence."

"It would take a sharp sword to split his skull," rejoined the Count. "A thick-headed blockhead, as rude and as hard as the iron that he hammers, but if he answers my purpose that is all I heed. He that doesn't fear me within ten miles around, is not likely to be easily frightened--I must set forth in half an hour, to meet my noble guest by the way; and as I go, I'll speak to the man, so that he shall be up before mid-day. Now, Adelaide, my child, go with your girls and gather the flowers and tender branches, so that you may make the dull old hall look light and cheerful as yourself, for there will we all sup to-night, even if the fiend says, Nay."

Thus saying, he left her standing with Ferdinand. It is strange--it is very strange, that blindness which in some circumstances comes over the most clear-sighted upon the questions in which they feel the deepest interest. But yet it is so common--I might say, so invariable--that let no one think it unnatural the Count of Ehrenstein should actually throw his daughter into the way of one to whom he would never have consented to give her. It was perhaps because he thought it impossible that such presumptuous love could enter into the young man's thoughts, It was the blindest of all passions--pride that dimmed even his keen eyes; and there he left them to the brief caress, the low spoken words of love, the looks far more eloquent. They both said they must part at once, yet they both lingered; they both thought it was no use to risk aught by staying there when they were to meet again so soon in the old hall, yet the near future could not win them from the sweet present. They both knew it was dangerous to be seen in close companionship, and yet the hands met and the thrilling fingers clasped upon each other. Adelaide would fain hear what

had befallen Ferdinand in the old hall; and he answered by telling how he loved her. She urged him to go, and to let her go, and he tried--oh, vain endeavour!--to explain to her the burning thirst of a young lover's heart to be near her he loves. He told her that one might as well expect the parched traveller over the Syrian sands to forbear the well as to ask him to quit her while she would stay; and Adelaide believed it without difficulty. They said much one way or another, and yet their conference was not long; for some noise upon the staircase scared them, and with a fresh spring of joy in their hearts from their brief interview, they parted for the time and hurried to their several tasks with the glad hope of meeting soon again.

CHAPTER VIII.

Ferdinand was busy at his work about a quarter of an hour after the Count of Ehrenstein had ridden forth with his train. The castle was left even more empty than the day before, for Seckendorf and his party had gone with their lord, and none of the feudal retainers of the house had yet arrived. Some grooms and horse-boys in the stables, and eight or ten men on the walls, or in the courts, were all that remained behind, besides the young gentleman himself; and they were not at all disposed to aid or interrupt him by their presence in a place which they all viewed with dread, even when they passed it at a distance. Many were their comments, indeed, upon his daring; and several of those comments were by no means favourable to their young lady's lover, for while some of the men wondered how Master Ferdinand was getting on, without venturing to go and see, others went the length of supposing that he must have either some amulet from the Holy Land, which was a charm against spirits, or a plain compact with the evil one, which gave him the command over them for a time.

In the mean while, Ferdinand worked away at his unaccustomed occupation, perhaps not quite so dexterously as if he had been an armourer's man, or a groom of the chambers to some great lord; but he did it cheerfully, and without apprehension; for the gay sunbeams shone through the dim casements and chequered the old mouldy pavement with a bright fretwork of light and shade. His heart, too, felt very summery, for there was hope within, and the expectation of love. Everything was done quickly, too, for he fancied that he might not be long without the presence of one he loved, and thought that every moment thus busily employed might well purchase one of sweeter occupation.

His first task was to raise the different suits of armour from the ground, and fix them in their places again. Nor was this an easy undertaking, for, in many cases, the thongs and buckles had given way in the fall, and the several pieces were scattered about, and had to be re-united. Nevertheless, he worked on zealously, stooping over the quaint old garments of steel, lifting their ponderous masses, and ever and anon casting back from his face the thick, glossy curls of his hair, as they fell over his brow and eyes. He showed no signs of fear, notwithstanding the strange sights which he had seen on the two preceding nights; he never started at the sound of the wind; he never turned to give the timid glance over his shoulder towards the door leading to the vaults; but more than once he looked towards the other entrance of the hall, and listened for any sound from the vestibule. At length, as he was raising one of the suits of harness, where the rusty gauntlet and vantrace were still stretched out, as he had seen them on his previous visit, some white spots upon the steel, seemed to catch his eye, and to awaken a train of new and interesting ideas, for he paused in his work, and with his hand to his brow, remained in deep thought for several minutes, with a smile upon his lips.

As he thus stood, the sound of voices speaking near the door was heard, and it was gently pushed open, while the well-known tones of Bertha exclaimed,--"I would not go in for Neustadt, and you do not want me, either, dear lady,--you know you do not; but I'll stay here and watch against any ghosts on this side. I'll open that other door, however, and have more light; for spirits don't like the daylight, and I don't like the dark."

"Well, stay there,--stay there, then," answered Adelaide; "I can carry in the wreaths myself."

Ere she concluded, Ferdinand was by her side, and, raising up the flowers and young branches which Bertha and her mistress had brought thither, he carried them in and laid them down upon the pavement of the hall. Bertha's merry eye was first turned, with a somewhat timid and apprehensive glance, towards the interior of the chamber, and then, with a meaning smile, to Ferdinand's countenance. As soon, however, as the lady had followed her lover in, the discreet damsel closed the door, murmuring to herself--"Well, love's the best charm against evil spirits, after all! Heigho!--I wish I had somebody to love!"

By this time, Ferdinand's hand clasped that of Adelaide; but I have noticed before that a strange change had come over the fair girl since their meeting on the preceding day; and that

change was more apparent now than ever. All doubt, all timidity seemed to be banished. There was no boldness, it is true, for modest gentleness seemed an inherent part of her nature; but the fear, the anxiety, the hesitation of unconfirmed and perilous love, no longer had any influence over her. When Ferdinand's hand clasped hers, she laid the other upon it, gazing in his eyes with a warm and affectionate light beaming in her own, and saying with a thoughtful, if not absent air, as if the question she put was as much to her own heart as to him,--"You love me, dear Ferdinand,--is it not so? And you will ever love me, and never do aught to grieve me, nor let others grieve me, if you can help it?"

"Can you doubt it, beloved?" cried Ferdinand, drawing her to him; "is not my whole heart and being only love for you?"

"Nay, I do not doubt it," answered Adelaide; "I will not doubt it.--Yet I have heard tales of men vowing deep vows, and breaking them; of their looking upon woman, and woman's love, but as a flower to be gathered and cast away: but I will not believe it. No, no!--we have known and loved in childhood, and we will love still. I will trust you, dear Ferdinand,--I will trust you; only promise me that if the time should ever come when deep grief and pain menaces your Adelaide, and it is in your power, by any act, to avert it, you will do so, whatever be the consequences."

"Can you suppose I would hesitate?" exclaimed Ferdinand, eagerly; "but I do promise, dear one!--I vow by all I hold sacred,--by all that is dearest to me, that you shall never ask me aught that can remove a grief from you, without my doing it at once."

"Thank you,--thank you," answered Adelaide, resting her face upon his shoulder, while he kissed her soft cheek; "then I am happy!--then I am all yours! I have longed for this moment to come, Ferdinand, for I wished to say all that might be said; and to tell the truth, it was for this opportunity I undertook so readily the task we have here to perform."

"And are you really not afraid, dear Adelaide?" asked her lover. "For, certainly, here I have seen fearful sights, though I think it must be a demon, indeed, that could harm you. Have you no fears?"

"None, none, in the world," she answered, gaily; "I set all spirits at defiance, Ferdinand, but the spirit of love; and it would have needed somewhat more than imaginary terrors to keep me away from you to-day, when we have so fair an opportunity of saying all that we could wish to each other."

"Nay, not all," answered Ferdinand; "there is no day, no hour, when I shall not have something more to say to you; if it be but to tell you, again and again, how I love you, how I thank you.--But there may be more, much more, to be said, dear Adelaide; there may be difficulties, dangers, unforeseen circumstances; and even with Bertha's aid, it may be impossible to communicate them to you fully and freely, without seeing you and speaking to you myself."

"Well, then, I will come to you," replied Adelaide, with a beaming smile, as if to banish all his apprehensions, like mist before the sun; "or if not, you shall come to me. I have no hesitation, I have no doubt now. All yesterday, after we parted, I was full of gloomy thoughts and dark apprehensions. I was like one wandering by night in a wood, and losing his way, to whichever side he turns. I was doubtful of myself, doubtful of you, doubtful of the past, doubtful of the future; but that has vanished away, and I am all your own."

"And what dispelled it?" asked Ferdinand.

"One word," answered Adelaide; "but you must not question me farther. I say I will come to you, or you shall come to me, at any hour, at any season that it may be needful.--I know I can trust you," she continued, gazing at him with a look grave and yet tender, and then raising her eyes towards the sky, "I do believe, Ferdinand, that for the best gift under Heaven's sun, you would not wrong your Adelaide in word, or thought, or deed, and it is that trust, as well as some necessity, that makes me promise you thus boldly to find means of seeing you whenever you desire it. Should there be danger to either of us, but especially to you, let me know it at once. Even if it be in the dead of the night, I should not be frightened, Ferdinand, if I saw you standing beside me,--ay, in the very spirit-walking time, when all mortal eyes are closed in sleep. I am very sure--quite sure, that you would not come without some real need, that no light motive would bring you, to my risk and to yours, and therefore I am thus bold, for love and confidence makes me so."

"Thank you, thank you, Adelaide. From my very heart I thank you," replied her lover, "not alone for the dear privilege you grant me; but from the trust that gives birth to the grant. You but judge me rightly, dear one. Your fair form, beyond all mortal beauty, may well charm my eyes; the touch of that dear hand, of that dear lip, may well be prized before all that earth can give; but not for the joy of heaven, my love, would I do aught that could tarnish the bright gem within that lovely casket. Your very confidence is a bond upon me, far stronger than your own reserve could be; and in your happiness, if I could sow one regret, I should curse myself for ever."

"But why should regret mingle with happiness?" asked Adelaide, half gaily, half thoughtfully; "there must be some very wicked and some very discontented people in the world, to make it so. It seems to me, Ferdinand, that God has provided us with so many pleasures that can produce no

regret, that we should show ourselves unworthy of his bounty did we seek others. Fields, gardens, mountains, forests, streams, these flowers, the singing of the birds, the sunshine and the sky, the very dreamlike clouds and their soft showers, the changes of the seasons, music, thought,--calm, tranquil thought, the music of the mind--and every form of meditation, whether it be upon our own strange nature and mysterious destiny, or on God's mercy to his creatures, or his great power and infinite wisdom--all these, ay Ferdinand, and innocent love, too, are surely full of joy, unsoiled and imperishable. They are like the notes of some tuneful instrument, each sweet in itself, but doubly sweet by those that go before, and follow and mingle with it in the harmony; and infinite, too, in change and in variety. What needs man more, that he should sully with his evil what God made pure and beautiful?"

"Ay, dear girl, and from one joy you have named, all others receive a tenfold brightness," answered Ferdinand; "innocent love has its own light to add to all the rest."

"I know it, Ferdinand; I feel it," answered Adelaide, "and I scruple not to tell you that I do; for once having said 'I love,' I have said all--though I one time thought I could never bring my lips to utter those two words."

"And I must ask no questions," said Ferdinand, "for your thoughts are changed, indeed, dear one."

"None, none;" answered Adelaide, with a gay laugh. "And now we must to our task, Ferdinand; for if they come and find it unperformed, they may inquire in their own thoughts, how we have loitered so. Aid me to hang up these garlands, and to fix the green branches on the walls, and then I will go and seek the wreaths that Theresa is still weaving."

He did as she desired him, moving the great chair of state for her tiny feet to climb and hang the flowers on every prominent place that would hold them; and often he mounted thither too, and supported her, lest she should fall, with the arm cast lightly round her waist, and the hands, as they came in contact, when stretched out to reach the projecting beam, or cast the garland over the wood-work, often clasped together with the gentle pressure of warm love; and if, from time to time, they paused for a moment or two to speak of the things of their own hearts, their pleasant toil was resumed the instant after, and proceeded the more quickly, from the happy spirit that was in both.

It was a dream of love and joy, and the flowers which Adelaide had brought were nearly all expended, when a rough voice was heard talking to Bertha, without, and Ferdinand sprang down lightly from the chair, and looked towards the door. It opened as he did so, and a man entered, on whose appearance I must pause for a moment, as we may see more of him hereafter.

CHAPTER IX.

The personage who broke in upon the conversation of Ferdinand and Adelaide must have been at least six or eight inches above the ordinary height of the human race. Nevertheless, though he undoubtedly looked a very tall man, and those who stood beside him felt themselves like pigmies, yet at first sight he did not seem so tall as he really was. Unlike most of those persons who deviate from the common standard, either above or below, there was no disproportion in his limbs, nor want of symmetry--the neck was not long, like that of a crane, the form was not spare and meagre, the joints were not large and heavy, the knees did not knock together as he walked. If there was anything out of proportion, it was that the chest and upperpart of the frame were even too broad and bulky; and the head was comparatively small; but it was round and well-shaped, with a capacious forehead, and the short brown hair curling round it like that of the Farnesian Hercules. The features of the face were good, but somewhat short, and the expression stern and bold. There were no wrinkles on that countenance, except a deep furrow between the eyes; and yet, by those indescribable indications which convince us of a fact without our well knowing why, one judged in a moment that the man who entered was between forty-five and fifty years of age, though everything in his whole aspect and carriage denoted undiminished vigour and activity. Here and there, indeed, in his beard and hair, might be traced a single white line, but that was all that spoke the passing of years.

The dress of this worthy personage was that of a handicraftsman of moderate wealth. His coat was of untanned leather, slashed here and there upon the arms--as was the custom of the times--and he wore before him a great leathern apron blackened and soiled, apparently with the labours of the forge. A little vanity, of the kind which the French call coquetry, was observable in the covering of his head; which was a cap or bonnet of black felt, bordered with a lace of gold; the brim was somewhat broad, slashed in the forms of one of the Greek mouldings, and turned back

towards the crown, while a bunch of green feathers, taken, not from the wing of the ostrich, but rather from that of some more homely bird, stretched across the front, and leaned towards his left shoulder. His shoes, or rather half boots, for they came up to his ankle, were long, and pointed at the toe; and under one arm he carried a number of pieces of lead and iron, while his right hand was armed with a sledge hammer, which, wielded by him, might have brained an elephant.

Behind the blacksmith came a lad (bearing a basket, full of various utensils of his trade), who, in any other situation, would have appeared a good-sized, comely youth, but who, by his side, looked a mere dwarf; and such was the effect of the man's appearance, that Adelaide, who had never beheld Franz Creussen before, turned somewhat pale at the sight, though Ferdinand welcomed him with a good-humoured smile of recognition, perhaps a little vexed that he had come so soon, but not attributing any blame to him on that account.

"Ha, ha, Master Ferdinand!" cried the giant, as soon as he saw him, "good morning to you, Sir, I thought how it would be--Why don't you help the lady? She can never get that bunch of flowers up there;" and at the same time striding forward, and towering above Adelaide even as she stood raised upon the chair, he stretched out his long, powerful arm, and fixed the wreath upon the spot she could not reach.

"You thought how what would be, Franz?" asked Ferdinand, who had remarked a peculiar tone as the blacksmith spoke, and a glance of the eye from himself to Adelaide.

But Franz Creussen did not answer his question, going on in a rambling manner. "So there are ghosts here, the Count tells me; and all the men and women but you two are afraid. Let the ghosts come hither, and see if I will not split their skulls with my hammer."

"Why, Franz, I hardly thought you would come," answered Ferdinand; "I heard you once tell the Count you would neither shoe his horses, nor do work of any kind for him. I am glad to see you in a better humour."

"I would not have come," answered the blacksmith, "only he told me that all the people were afraid; and as I never yet saw a thing to be afraid of, I came to look if I could find it here. But I must set to work, Master Ferdinand.--God help us, how thou art grown! When I first saw thee, thou wert scarce half an ell high, and now thou art above my shoulder."

Ferdinand smiled, for though he was certainly above the blacksmith's shoulder, he was not much higher, and had no reason to believe he would ever rise above the height he had attained. Franz Creussen, however, turned abruptly to his work, and with the aid of his boy, soon unhinged the latticed part of the casement nearest the door, in which the largest fractures were, perceptible. He then proceeded to another and another, while Ferdinand continued to aid the fair girl in ornamenting the other side of the hall, with somewhat less familiarity of demeanour; but nevertheless many a dear whispered word passed between them, as they hung the garlands, or shook the banners, or crowned the war crests of the old helmets with bunches of flowers.

At length, as the blacksmith reached the fourth window, Adelaide's store was exhausted, and she said, "I must go and bring more, Ferdinand; Theresa, I dare say, has twined plenty of wreaths by this time; and in the mean while, if you could drive some nails between the stone-work of the arches, we could span over the vault with green branches, and make the old hall look like a forest bower."

"I will get Franz to help me," answered her lover; "his arm, I should think, would drive a nail into the heart of the stone, if it were needful."

As soon as she was gone, however, Franz handed down the lattice of the fourth window to his apprentice, saying, "There, carry that to the little court by the stables--I will work there. Then come for the others, boy;" and as the youth departed, the stout man leaned upon his hammer, and gazed after him till the door was closed.

"Come, Franz, help me to drive some nails in here, to hold some boughs," said Ferdinand. But Franz Creussen strode up to him, and grasping him tightly by the shoulder with his heavy hand, he said, in a low voice, bending down his head, "Be careful, be careful, young man."

"Be careful of what?" asked Ferdinand.

"Pooh! nonsense," cried Franz Creussen, "do you think others will not see what I see? and if they do, you may chance to go to bed one night, shorter by the head."

Ferdinand was somewhat puzzled how to answer. It was a case, perhaps, in which insincerity is tolerated by all the rules of social polity; but he knew the man who spoke to him to be honest and true-hearted, and one who had always displayed towards him a peculiar and remarkable degree of kindness and regard when he was almost at open enmity with all the rest of the Count of Ehrenstein's household. After a moment's hesitation, however, he answered, "I know not what you have seen, Franz, to make you use such words; but I wish you would speak more plainly. I do believe you love me, and would do all you can to serve me."

"Ay, more than you know, Master Ferdinand," replied the blacksmith. "Speak more plainly!

Why I have spoken plainly enough. Who is it makes love to his lord's daughter, and thinks that all other men are buzzards, and can only see by candle-light? I knew it would be so long ago, and told Father George so, too, when he first put you here."

"But if Father George wishes it," rejoined Ferdinand, looking up in his face.

"Why I suppose he knows best, then," answered the man, turning on his heel, "but it's a dangerous game. A neck's but a neck, and that's soon cut through.--But he knows more than I do, and I suppose he is right;" and thus saying, he searched his basket for a number of large nails that it contained, and was soon busily driving them in between the joints of the stone-work, without adding a word more.

In a minute after, his boy returned to take away another of the frames, and as soon as he was gone, Franz Creussen turned to Ferdinand again, and said, "I'll tell you what, young gentleman; Father George knows best, and so you must follow his counsel; but these monks, though they manage all the world, do not always manage it as they like best; and if this matter should go wrong, and you should need help, you will always know where to find it, as long as Franz Creussen lives. In any time of need, come down to me if you can; and if you can't get out, which is not an unlikely case, get me down word, and the door will be strong indeed that Franz Creussen's arm cannot open."

"Thank you, Franz, thank you," answered Ferdinand, grasping his hand. "But I would not have you peril yourself for me. I must take my fate as I find it, and no fears for myself will stop me."

"That's right, that's right," answered Franz Creussen. "Life would not be worth keeping if it always wanted watching. But I don't fear peril either, good youth; and I can do more than you think, for there's many a man round about would follow my leathern apron as soon as a knight's banner; I can ride with as good a train, if I like it, as any baron in the land. But all I tell you is, don't you wait too long. If you find yourself in danger come to Franz Creussen in time--the good Count is quick in his despatch; didn't he strangle the poor fellow who he thought--or said, whether he thought it or not--had stabbed his brother, within twelve hours after he brought home the news of the last Count's death?"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Ferdinand, "I was not aware he had done so."

"Ay, ay," answered the blacksmith, "he did it sure enough; you may see his bones, poor fellow, chained to the pillar against which they strangled him, down in the serf's burial vault--but that was before you came here, of course, so you can't know much of it."

"I was aware he had put him to death," replied Ferdinand, "but did not know he had been so prompt in his execution."

"He was, though," rejoined the blacksmith, "and for that reason, be you prompt too. If you see signs of danger, come to Franz Creussen at once--better to him than to the Abbey, for though the monks hold their own well enough against the Count, they do not like to meddle in other people's quarrels; and it is likely there would be long consultations, before the end of which, the Abbey might be stormed, or at the end of which you might be given up."

As he spoke, the Lady Adelaide returned with a fresh supply of garlands, and Franz Creussen turned away to drive in more nails on which to hang the branches; and, at the end of about a quarter of an hour, he quitted the hall, saying with a laugh,--"I'll go work at the casements, in the court; I am better there than here; and you shall have timely notice when the Count is coming up the hill."

"That man looked very strange," said Adelaide, "and spoke strangely too. Can he suspect anything, Ferdinand? He frightened me."

"Oh, do not fear him, dearest girl!" replied her lover; "he is honest and true, if ever one was so, and has a great love for me. I must not conceal from you, my beloved, that he does suspect, and has been warning me, if any danger should arise, to fly to him speedily, or to send to him at once, if I should be imprisoned. He is much loved, and much feared in the country round, and might give good and serviceable aid in case of need."

"Heaven forbid that it should ever be required!" cried Adelaide, clasping her two hands together, and gazing sadly down; but the moment after, the light rose in her eyes again, and she looked up with a bright smile, exclaiming,--"I am doing what is right, and I will not fear; but we must be careful, dear Ferdinand; we must not, for the mere happiness of the moment, call suspicions upon us that might endanger the happiness of our lives. Let us to our task--let us to our task, and show them, when they return, that we have been right busy in that we undertook."

For the next three or four hours, with a brief interruption for the mid-day meal, the lady and her lover continued to employ themselves in decorating the old hall; and, aided by Franz Creussen and his lad, contrived completely to change the appearance of the place. Bertha, too, by seeing the other four continually go in and come out, by hearing the cheerful sounds of their voices from within, and by the presence of so many persons who seemed to have no fear, was at length encouraged to look in, and then to speak from the door to her mistress at the other end of the hall; and lastly, to enter herself, and assist with her own hands.

Everything was nearly completed; but a few more boughs were required to be added to form a sort of canopy over the chair of state, and to bring in the tables from the other halls, when the distant sound of a trumpet was heard, and Franz Creussen's boy learned from the feudal retainers, who had by this time assembled in considerable numbers, that a large body of horsemen was coming over the opposite hill. Adelaide hastened away to prepare herself for the reception of her father's guests; but Ferdinand remained for a few minutes longer, to finish, with hurried hands, all that remained to be done, and then left the hall with Franz Creussen, who declared that he would now hasten home, adding, in a surly tone,--"I will not stay to see them revel who have no right to be here."

At the door, however, Ferdinand turned to look back, and mark the general effect which had been produced by the labours of the day. A pleasant, though a somewhat strangely mingled sight it was, and certainly the change which had been produced was very great. The old arches, with their fretted roofs above, the grey stone-work, from which the hue of age and disuse could not be removed, contrasted curiously with the gay garlands of bright summer flowers that crowned the chapters of the pillars, and hung in wavy lines along the walls. The green boughs, too, with their regular irregularity, forming a vault as it were within the vault, crossed in different directions by the banners, now shaken clear of the dust which had long covered them, and the rushes with which the floor was thickly strewn, gave the old hall, as Adelaide had said, the appearance of a forest glade, dressed out with flags for some chivalrous holiday; and as he stood and looked around, strange dreamy visions crossed his mind, such as could present themselves only to fancy in a chivalrous age. Thoughts of wild and strange adventure, of renown in arms, of generous deeds and noble daring, of befriending the poor and needy, of supporting the weak and oppressed, of overthrowing the wrong-doer and delivering the wronged, mixed in strange confusion with sylvan sports and forest glades, and calm hours spent by castle hearths between. But in every scene, with every picture, came one fair, dear form; wherever fancy placed him, the bright soft eyes looked at him, the sweet lips smiled his reward. She whom he loved was the soul of all his imaginings, and he felt how truly it was that innocent love gave its own sunshine to everything around. Even the hall he had just been decorating lost its light when she was gone, the old walls grew cold and damp, the flowers seemed not half so fair, the boughs appeared to droop more languidly. It all looked but half as gay as when Adelaide was there, and yet he saw not what could have been done better. Nevertheless, a great change had been effected; and when he compared the hall with what it had been, before he and Adelaide had undertaken its arrangement, he felt sure that his lord would think that they had laboured well during his absence, and though but half-contented with his work, hastened to his chamber to remove the dust from his face and hands, and don his festival attire.

CHAPTER X.

A body of about some sixty armed vassals of the house of Ehrenstein, was drawn up in the outer court of the castle. They were under different subordinate leaders, for by the subdivision of land, in descending from one generation to another, the exact number which had been originally assigned by tenure to different portions of the signory, had become somewhat confused, and also difficult to compute; for many small properties were now only bound to send half a man, and others one, two, or three and a half. As it was not so easy to divide a man as it had been found to divide the ground that nourished him, each little community was usually called upon to send its aggregate number of soldiers, with whom was a chief appointed to command them under the Lord of Ehrenstein, or one of his officers.

As Ferdinand of Altenburg was the only person of note in the household of the Count, who now remained in the castle, the villagers were, of course, under his guidance, and he endeavoured to array them in such a sort as to make the greatest possible display of force on the entrance of the lord of the castle with his guests. The outer gates, however, were closed by his orders, although some of the retainers thought it not a little strange that the young gentleman should shut the doors upon the Count himself. But Ferdinand knew well his task, and after directing a banner to be displayed upon the walls, he approached the gates, and waited with some impatience, listening for the sounds from without.

At length the shrill blast of a trumpet upon the bridge, within a few yards of the spot where he stood, showed him that the Count was near; and opening the wicket, he demanded--"Who seeks to enter here?"

The trumpeter replied in the same tone--"The Count of Ehrenstein. Open the gates to your lord!" And the young gentleman instantly commanded them to be flung back, that the cavalcade might enter.

It consisted of some sixty or seventy men, with a number of baggage horses following in the rear. At the head of the first and principal group, appeared the Count himself, in the garments of peace, while on his left rode a fine-looking man, somewhat past the middle age, partially armed. His head was only covered with an ordinary velvet cap and plume, however, so that Ferdinand had a full opportunity of gazing at his features, and he did so with a degree of interest for which he knew no cause. He had heard of Count Frederick of Leiningen, indeed, as a gallant and skilful soldier, and a frank-hearted and amiable man. But he had seen many such without feeling the same sort of curiosity which he now experienced. The Count's face was one that well expressed his character; blithe and good-humoured, though with a high, thoughtful brow, while two or three scars upon his lip and cheek, showed that he had not acquired the glory of arms without tasting the perils and the pangs of war. His hair, nearly white, falling from beneath his cap, would have seemed to show a more advanced period of life than the Count of Ehrenstein had attained; but on the other hand, the guest was more upright and stately in person than his host, and rode his horse with a more martial air. Behind those two appeared old Seckendorf and Karl of Mosbach, with several knights of Count Frederick's train; and the first group was closed by a party which would have appeared very strange, and in most unnatural companionship to our eyes, though in those times it was of every day occurrence. On the right was a priest, in his ordinary riding apparel, bearing a dry branch of the Oriental palm in his hand; and on the left rode a tall, powerful personage, whose motley garb, and sort of Phrygian bonnet, surmounted by a bell instead of a tassel, spoke him the jester of the high nobleman whom he followed. He, also, was past the middle age, and his beard, which seemed to have been once of a rich dark brown, was now thickly mingled with white; his eyebrows were quite blanched, but his eye was keen and quick, and his teeth white and perfect. The powerful horse that he bestrode, he managed with ease, and even grace; and as he came forward, he sent a rapid and marking glance over every tower and battlement of the castle, and round all the retainers of the house of Ehrenstein, scrutinizing each face, and then passing on. Behind these two, and mounted upon a horse as tall as those that went before, was a dwarf, excessively diminutive in size, and hideous in feature, form, and complexion; he was decked out in all the gayest colours that could be found, which seemed to render his deformity but the more apparent, and his small black eyes twinkled from beneath his bent brows, with a dark, malicious expression, as if in that small frame there, were a vast store of hatred for all human things more favoured by nature than himself. Some pages in attendance, of good birth, followed, and then the men at arms.

Just beyond the arch of the gateway stood the Lady Adelaide, with her women, looking more lovely--at least in the eyes of Ferdinand of Altenburg--than she had ever done before; the colour of her cheek heightened, and the light in her eye which can only be given by love. As soon as Count Frederick saw her, he spoke a few words to her father in a low voice; the Lord of Ehrenstein bowed his head, and his guest instantly sprang to the ground, and advancing gracefully to the lady, took her hand, and pressed his lips upon it. The rest of the party also dismounted, and Count Frederick, still holding Adelaide by the hand, and gazing upon her with a look of admiration and interest, was led to the lesser hall, where her father, apologizing for being absent a moment, left him to the entertainment of the fair lady for a time, and hurrying back into the court, called Ferdinand to him.

"Is all prepared in the hall?" he asked, with a low voice.

"Yes, my good lord," replied the young man. "But I pray you do not go to see it yet, till it be lighted up. The evening is beginning to fall, and at supper-time it will show as you could wish it. So sweetly has Lady Adelaide decked it all, it seems as if she were born a queen of flowers, and that they do her bidding willingly."

The Count smiled, but went on to say, "Then you had nothing to interrupt you--none of these strange sights again?"

"None, none, my lord," answered Ferdinand. "The only strange sight that visited us during the day, was that giant Franz Creussen; but he did us good service, helped to reach up where we could not stretch our arms, and in the labouring part did more than any one. He was only just gone when you arrived."

"He passed us on the road, without a word," replied the Count; "neither doffed his bonnet, nor made any sign of reverence. The time may come for a reckoning between me and good Franz Creussen, when we shall know whether the noble is to be bearded by a serf."

"I believe he means no harm, my lord Count," replied Ferdinand, warmly, but respectfully: "he has borne arms, I have heard, and is somewhat rough in manners; but all the country people speak well of him, and men say he is no serf, but of good blood."

"His trade is a churl's, at all events," replied the Count, frowning, "and the trade makes the man, youth.--I know right well he has borne arms--'tis that renders him insolent. The day will come, however--the day will come.--All men speak well of him, eh? Did you ever know any one of whom all men spoke well, who was not a cunning knave, skilful in taking advantage of the follies of others for their own purposes? The man whom the rabble curse, is often their best friend; the fawning sycophant who panders to their caprices, uses them but as means, to cast them off when he has done with them."

Ferdinand could have well replied, that Franz Creussen was not one to fawn on any man; but

he saw that his lord was in no mood to hear truth, and after giving a moment to gloomy thought, the Count repeated his question. "So all passed quietly?"

"So peacefully and lightly, my good lord," answered Ferdinand, "that standing there in the broad sunshine of the day, I could hardly believe that my eyes had not played me the knave last night, and cheated me with idle visions."

"Perhaps it was so," said the Count, "and yet that banner--that was no vision, Ferdinand. However, we must forget such things, and you must choose out twenty of the men to be with us in the hall to-night. Lay my commands strictly on them to show no signs of fear, and forbid all the rest even to whisper one word of these vain tales to any of the guests. I have spoken with Seckendorf and Mosbach, already; but I trust more to you, Ferdinand, for they have doubts and fears that you are without. Neither, to say the truth, are they very courteous. Here, Seckendorf has been brawling already with one of Count Frederick's chief followers. You must try and keep peace and quietness, and see that hospitable courtesy be shown to all."

"I cannot meddle with Seckendorf and Mosbach, my lord," answered Ferdinand, "for they are knights, and I am none, and moreover, are my elders; but all the rest I can easily command, partly by love, and partly by authority, if you will delegate some power to me to rule them as I think best, when you are not present."

"I will, I will, good youth," replied the Count; "at supper-time I will do it publicly, with thanks for what you have already done. You shall be my Master of the Household for the time, and in that character you must show every kind attention not only to Count Frederick himself, but to his favourite followers."

"There is sufficient good accommodation provided for his knights, my lord," answered Ferdinand. "I saw to that before I went to the hall. Everything is ready for seven, and I see but five."

"Good faith! there are others whom he cares for more than his knights," answered the Count. "There is the priest, ay, and the jester too. My old friend seems full of strange fantasies, and we must humour them. This fool whom he has with him saved his life in the Holy Land, it seems; and though he is at times somewhat insolent, even to his lord--as all such knavish fools are--not only does he bear with him patiently, but ever keeping in mind this one service, sets him at table with his knights, and listens to him like an oracle. He and the priest must sit with us; and we may draw diversion from the one if not from the other. Be sure that you are civil to him, my good youth, for Count Frederick's friendship may stand me in good stead. Then there's a youth--there he stands, talking to Mosbach--a down-looking quick-eyed lad, who seems a favourite too."

"What is his name, my lord?" asked Ferdinand, turning his eyes in the direction of the group of which the Count spoke.

"Martin of Dillberg," said his lord. "He is a gentleman by birth, it seems, but of no very high nobility. Not like the Altenburgs," he continued, with a smile and a flattering tone, "whose very blood is wealth. So now go, Ferdinand, and see that all be arranged as I have said, for I must hie me back again, and lead this good lord to his apartments. You do the same for the others; and let the trumpet sound some minutes before supper, that we may all be gathered in the other hall."

Thus saying, he left him; but in the mean while some words of interest had passed between Adelaide and Count Frederick, who had remained with her near one of the windows, while the few attendants who had followed them were grouped together talking at the other end of the chamber.

He had gazed at her earnestly, but not offensively, when they first met, just within the castle gates. It was a look of kind, almost paternal tenderness with which he appeared to interrogate her fair face. It seemed to say, Are you as good as you are beautiful, as happy as you are bright, sweet child? and twice, as he led her to the hall, he turned his head to look at her with the same expression; but as soon as they had entered, he said, turning towards the casement, "I feel as if we were old acquaintances, my dear young lady; so you must not think it strange that I treat you as one. I have known your father long and well--since we were boys together; and I knew your uncle better still--a noble and high-minded man he was, as sportful as a child, and yet with the courage of a warrior, and the conduct of a sage--and I cannot help looking upon you almost as a daughter. Thus, if I do so sometimes, and seem more familiar, and more concerned about your happiness than our young acquaintance might warrant, you will forgive me."

"Kindness needs no forgiveness, my noble lord," replied Adelaide, thinking she remarked something peculiar in the Prince's tone, she knew not well what.

"Yes, for it may sometimes seem impertinent," answered Count Frederick. "But methinks, my child, if I can read the clear book of your eyes aright, you are one who can see very speedily what are the motives of words or actions, which to some might seem strange. I am preparing you for the demeanour of an odd old man--but I think I have said enough."

"I do not know, my lord," said Adelaide, casting down her eyes, in some doubt and confusion, "enough to awaken curiosity, but not to satisfy it."

"Perhaps not enough to win confidence," replied Count Frederick, "yet, as I never knew that it could be gained by words, I must leave deeds to speak for me, and will only tell you more, that I have seen and conversed with a dear friend of yours, and that if you should need, at any time, aid and protection, you will have it from Frederick of Leiningen."

"A friend of mine?" said Adelaide, in surprise.

"Yes, indeed," replied her companion, "and a good friend too, who told me that a time was coming when you might need support; and I promised to give it. But I must hear more myself before I can speak farther. In the mean time, keep what I have said to your own bosom, but trust me as far as you will, when you have need.--What is it now, Herr von Narren?" he continued, as his jester approached him. "What is it that you want?"

"What do I want?" said the man in motley, "Good faith! uncle Frederick, my answer, to be pertinent, must be as long as a dictionary. First, I want lands and lordships, and a purse well stored; then, I want wit--at least, so men tell me; and I myself judge that I want a pretty wife. Sure, I ought to have one or the other, though both cannot go together, for a pretty wife takes away a man's wit, and a man who has wit has not a pretty wife; then I want boots of untanned leather broided with gold, and a well-darned doublet, which the air of heaven knoweth right well I have not got. Give you good luck, fair lady; are you the daughter of this castle?"

"I am the daughter of its lord," replied Adelaide, with a smile.

"Then you are the daughter of the castle," answered the jester, "and its only begotten child!"

"How do you prove that, Herr von Narren?" asked Count Frederick, seeming to enjoy very much the man's dull jokes.

"Now cogitate," replied the jester. "Is not the castle made of stone?--all lords' hearts are made of stone, too. He is the lord of the castle, and if she is the daughter of his heart, she is the daughter of a stone; the castle is made of stone, *ergo*, she is the daughter of the castle."

"It halts!--it halts!" cried Count Frederick; "your argument is lame of one foot!"

"My father's heart has never been of stone to me," replied Adelaide, gently.

"Perhaps you never cut it, or you would have found it so, pretty blossom," said the jester, more gravely than was his wont; and then turning to Count Frederick, he was about to continue in his usual strain, when their host entered, and in courteous terms, and with the ceremonious manners of the day, besought his noble guest to follow him to the apartments which had been prepared for him.

Adelaide remained some minutes behind. I will not attempt to explain why; for ladies' thoughts and motives form a difficult book to read. It was certainly likely that Ferdinand of Altenburg would speedily return to the hall; and perhaps she might not be unwilling to see him again for a few minutes; or perhaps she might feel time hang heavy on her hands, as it often did in those old castles, and she be well disposed to while away a brief space in talking even with a jester. Let those who are wise in such things, judge. At all events, her conversation went on with Herr von Narren, as Count Frederick called him; and she it was who renewed it, saying,--

"You accompanied Count Frederick from the Holy Land, I think?"

"No, lady, he accompanied me," answered the jester; "fools always lead the way, you know, and wise men follow."

"But there was nothing foolish in coming back to your native country," said Adelaide.

"If it was wise to go, as all men said," replied the jester, "it was foolish to come back. But rats will put their heads into a trap, and then strive to pull them out, too late. Is your ladyship fond of strawberries and cream?"

"Not extravagantly," answered Adelaide.

"Then God give you such wise economy in all things!" cried the jester. "Even love may surfeit, if we take too much of it."

From some internal emotion, the blood rose in the lady's cheek, whether she would or not, but she forced herself to reply,--"Nay, I doubt that, Sir; 'tis when we love unwisely that there is danger. We cannot love too well when we love wisely."

"Well cannot be ill, indeed," said the fool, with a sage look, "so says Aristotle, or I mistake; yet I have heard my grandmother declare, and she was as wise as the old Greek, that all sweet things will surfeit. Now love is a sweet thing to all young hearts; and were I a boy in the castle, I would avoid that pantry, for it may contain dangerous dainties."

Adelaide mused for a moment, asking herself whether the man, indeed, spoke at random; but when he saw that she replied not, he went on,--"Beauty, wisdom, wit, policy, a soft voice, and a delicate step--even chalked soles and a flat heel--never yet kept a man from stumbling, if he ran

too fast; and so, fair lady, as you are the daughter of the castle, and I am Count Frederick's fool, we will go gently, and not fall in love with each other, lest our fortunes should be made a ballad of."

"I should think there was no great chance of your falling in love with me, good Sir," answered Adelaide; "'tis a danger easily eschewed."

"Faith, I know not that, if you look out of the upper windows so sweetly," replied the jester, pointing towards Adelaide's eyes; "I am more in love already than I ever thought to be with one of your house. If young hearts are like dry wood, why should not old ones be tinder?"

The lady was saved the necessity of replying, by her father's entrance; and she was not disinclined to break off a conversation which had become embarrassing. Retiring then quickly, she sought her own chamber, traversing the passages and corridors now crowded with men carrying up the baggage which had been brought with Count Frederick's train.

CHAPTER XI.

The crescents and sconces were lighted in the great hall, and all those who were to be honoured with a seat at the banquet of the evening were beginning to assemble in the lesser hall. On this occasion, none were admitted to the table of their lords but such as could either show some claim to noble blood, or were distinguished by particular favour. Nevertheless, the guests were very numerous, for the changes which time had produced in the strict feudal system, and in the severity of the ancient chivalry, admitted many to distinction who would formerly have been excluded; and every man, not absolutely a serf, was looked upon as noble, and entitled to bear arms. Priests and friars, whether they could prove their ancestry or not, found ready admission to the tables even of monarchs; and in times of need and danger, when it was necessary to court popular support, the leaders of the free communes were treated with every sort of honour. The feudal system, indeed, at this time, may be said to have been completely disorganised; and amongst many symptoms of the total overthrow which was approaching, was that mixture of classes, and the reverence for a great many qualities, some of them much superior to mere ancestry, and some of them perhaps inferior. However that may be, the number of those who, notwithstanding all customary limitations, were entitled to dine with the Count of Ehrenstein and his princely guest, did not amount to less than seventy; and Adelaide, when she entered the lesser hall with her father, felt her heart beat somewhat timidly at the sight of so many who were perfect strangers to her.

It was to be remarked that amongst the various groups which the room contained, the attendants of the lord of Ehrenstein looked grave, moody, and anxious, while those of Count Frederick of Leiningen, not aware of any cause for apprehension, were cheerful, if not merry. Numbers, however, have a very encouraging effect; and with so many companions around them, old Seckendorf and Mosbach, with their fellow-soldiers of the castle, had screwed their courage to the sticking point, and were prepared to face the ghosts of the old hall without any external signs of fear. It had cost some trouble, indeed, to get the cooks and sewers of the household to place the viands for the supper on the tables, but the example of Ferdinand and Adelaide, and the knowledge that they, with Franz Creussen and his boy, had passed the whole morning in the hall without disturbance, induced them rather to risk a meeting with the ghosts than to encounter their lord's anger; and in parties of five and six, they had at length ventured in, heavily laden with provisions.

Their terrors had caused some delay, however; and it was not till the Count had waited impatiently for near a quarter of an hour, that the trumpets were heard sounding clear and shrill from below. After a few moments wasted, as was customary, to show that no one was in haste, Count Frederick offered his hand to Adelaide, and led her to the door, and the whole party moved forward towards the banquet room.

"Let the others go first, Mosbach," said Seckendorf, in a low tone; "the devil may take them all, if he likes, so that he leave me enough for supper: I am as ravenous as a wolf!"

"So am I," answered Mosbach; "but I would rather go hungry to bed than sup in that dreary old hall, with the ghastly company we are likely to have."

The sight that met their eye, however, when they approached the great door, was one that they little expected. The whole hall was in a blaze of light; tapers were hung thickly on the walls and in the arches, showing forth, in fine relief, the garlands of flowers with which Adelaide had decked them, and the branches of evergreen which both tapestried and canopied the hall. The

banners, freed from the dust of many years, waved gaily overhead; the tables groaned with well-cooked viands, and long ranges of cups, goblets, and tankards, in gold and silver--for the Count had brought forth all his stores of splendour--flashed back the rays of the lights around, and added to the rich and cheerful aspect of the whole.

Count Frederick paused for an instant, exclaiming,--"Why, this is a scene of fairy land!" and the Count of Ehrenstein himself gazed round with wonder and pleasure on a sight which far surpassed his previous expectations. He made no observation, however, but moved on to take his seat in the great chair, in the centre of the cross table, and several minutes were spent in arranging the guests according to their rank and station. Adelaide was placed upon her father's left, Count Frederick on his right; the priest sat next the lady, and then the knights around, while Ferdinand, in a courteous tone, assigned the jester a seat at the angle of the two tables, so that he could converse with his lord during their meal, according to custom, without being actually placed at the same table. This arrangement created much surprise amongst the followers of the house of Ehrenstein, and some displeasure, but the attendants of Count Frederick seemed to look upon it as a matter of course.

Ferdinand himself was about to take a seat much farther down, but, as he moved towards it, the Count called him up, saying, "Here is room for you, Ferdinand. Well and faithfully have you done all that was entrusted to you, and neither a braver heart nor a better head have we amongst us. I name you the Master of my Household from this hour, and leave my good guests to your care and courtesy whenever I am not present."

"Well may he make him master of his household," said Seckendorf, in a whisper, to Mosbach, "for he seems master of the spirits as well as the bodies. I am sure without their help he never could have done all this."

"He had Franz Creussen with him," mumbled Karl of Mosbach; "and I don't see why a boy like that, not knighted yet, should be put over our heads."

"He's a good youth, he's a good youth," answered Seckendorf; "and may well have an office that neither you nor I could manage. We are over his head in arms, and that is all we have to care about."

In the mean while Count Frederick had put some question to his entertainer, who bowed his head, replying, "Yes, the same, Ferdinand of Altenburg," and the old nobleman instantly rose up, as Ferdinand advanced with some degree of diffidence, and took him in his arms, saying, "Ah! good youth, I am right glad to see you. I knew your father well, a gallant gentleman as ever drew a sword. He died in foreign lands, many long years ago. We must know each other better, my son. Here, Philip of Wernheim, I pray you for this night make room for him beside me."

"Nay, my good lord," said Ferdinand; "I beseech you excuse me--I must not displace a noble gentleman so much older and better than myself."

"There, sit you down, boy," cried the bluff old soldier, to whom the Count had spoken, taking him by the shoulder and thrusting him into the seat, with a laugh, "It matters not where a man sits. If he have honour, he will carry his honour about with him; if he have none, he may well sit low. I will go place me by my old friend, the Herr von Narren, and see whether his sharp wit will crack my hard skull."

Thus saying he moved round, and took a seat at the other side of the cross table, saying to the jester, in a low tone, as he sat down, "Why, how now, you seem dull, mein Herr, cheer up."

The jester suddenly raised his face, and answered, "What makes a cat mew and a lion roar--a young man fierce and an old man dull?--Hunger, hunger, Sir Philip! Heaven send the good priest a weak breath and a strong appetite, for he is rising to bless the meat, I see, and if he be long about it, like the grace of many another man, it will be a curse instead of a blessing."

The priest, however, was as hungry as the rest, and his words quick and few. The meal began, and for well nigh half an hour it passed nearly in silence, but then, as the appetite was assuaged, and wine began to flow, the tongue was allowed time to act as well as the teeth; and Count Frederick began to urge the jester to speak, though the latter, either from not having yet satisfied his hunger, or perhaps from weariness with long travel, seemed little disposed to indulge his lord.

"Come, come, my friend," cried Count Frederick, at length; "thou art playing the silent counsellor to-night,--what dost thou cogitate?"

"Bitter sweet," answered the jester. "Call you me counsellor, uncle? I would give you all right good advice and sharp, if you would but take it--man, woman, and child."

"Let us hear, let us hear," cried Count Frederick; "then will we judge whether it be worth the taking. Begin with the lady, cousin, as in duty-bound."

"Well, then, here's for her counsel," said the jester, laying his finger on his brow:--

THE JESTER'S ADVICE TO LADIES.

"Flaunt not your beauty in the common eye,
Lest, like hedge flowers, it be not thought worth plucking,
Trust to no young man's tender word or sigh;
For even pigs are gentle when they're sucking.

"Judge of your lover by his deeds to others,
For to yourself he's ever a deceiver.
Mark, girls, your fathers' conduct to your mothers,
And each be, if she can be, a believer."

"Good counsel, cousin! good counsel!" cried Count Frederick, "but now for another. What say you to the young men?"

"Good faith! uncle, I know not that I have anything to say," answered the jester; "for whatever age says, youth will not believe, and whatever wisdom advises, folly will not follow; grace has gone out of season with garden rue; and wit, as well as wisdom, has become the property of fools. Argue me now wisely, with a sleek young crimson-spotted trout, upon the eminent perdition which befalls him if he snaps at a gay-looking fly with a hook in its belly; yet will your trout leap at the bait, and soon be flapping his broad tail on the bank. If the hook break in his jaws, indeed, he will gain wit from his wound, and look before he leaps another time--experience is the scourge that drives us all, admonition but a fool's blown bladder, that makes a sound where it strikes, but no impression. Boys will after their own game, as a goshawk after a partridge--and a pretty pair of heels, or a small delicate hand, most kissable and sugary, rosy lips set in a white skin, like strawberries in cream, and eyes that say 'Come, love me,' will any day, about feeding time, make a lad like that jump at a hook that will draw him into the frying-pan. Heaven help and mend us all!

"Beauty's a butterfly, and youth's a boy,
Let him catch it if he can.
When he casts away his toy,
He may learn to be a man."

"Pretty Mistress Bertha wouldn't thank him if she could hear that," said Seckendorf, apart to his fellow-knight.

"Mistress Bertha!" answered old Mosbach. "I've a notion the young cockerel carries his eyes higher than that, and all this notice of him will spoil him. The other day I saw him looking into the Lady Adelaide's eyes, and she into his, as if they were drinking love pledges to one another."

"Pooh! nonsense," answered Seckendorf. "You are always finding out a nest of cock's eggs, Karl. Have you nothing to say to us, Sir Jester?" he continued aloud, speaking across the table.

"Good faith! but little," answered the other; "your old man is worse to deal with than your young one, for he is as weak in the wit as in the hams, and his brain, like a worn horse-trough, is ever leaking with watery talk.

"Graybeards and wisdom were married one day;--
'Tis a very long time since then--
But they parted by chance upon the highway
And ne'er came together again.

"Leave wine, and leave women, graybeard, and leave oaths,
Leave dicing, and jesting, and scoffing;
And thou'lt find thine old wife, dressed in her best clothes,
At thy long journey's end--in the coffin."

"There Seckendorf," cried the Count of Ehrenstein, "you have enough, methinks. For my part; I will not tempt our friend."

"Then you shall have counsel without asking," answered the jester, and he went on in his usual rude verse as follows:--

"The noble lord, the just, the true--
Methinks I see him now--
Claims from no vassal more than due--
But gives him more, I trow.

"No stolen swine grunts in his sty,
No plundered goose complains,
No cackling hens against him cry,
His barn no spoil contains.

"Quick he restores what's wrongly got,

Without a suit at law,
His sword has never cut a knot,
His fingers could not draw.

"If such thou art, no danger dread,
In camp, in court, in town,
But if thou'rt not, beware thy head,
For sure thou'lt tumble down."

At the first stanza the Lord of Ehrenstein smiled pleasantly, but as the jester went on to paint a character, which by no stretch of human vanity he could attribute to himself, his laugh grew somewhat grim, and although all the customs of the day required that he should seem amused with the jester's observations, even when they hit him the hardest, yet he might have made a somewhat tart reply in the shape of a joke, which he was very well qualified to do, if he had not been interrupted before he could speak. Just as the jester concluded, however, a loud, wild, extraordinary burst of martial music drowned every other sound at the table: clarions and trumpets, drums and atabals, sounded all round the hall, in a strain so peculiar, that ears which had once heard it, could never forget it again. Count Frederick started, and turned towards the Count, exclaiming, "Odds life! we are in Africa again. Whence got you this Moorish music, my lord? I have not heard the like since I was at Damietta. You must have a whole troop of Moslema."

The Count's cheek had turned very pale, and Ferdinand's eye was seen wandering round the hall, as if expecting some strange sight suddenly to present itself.

"In truth, I know not whence these sounds come," answered the Count, after a moment's pause for consideration; and he then added, seeing that any further attempt at concealment would be vain, "It is no ordinary place, this castle of Ehrenstein, my noble friend. We have strange sights, and strange sounds here. But what matters it? We are not men to be frightened by unsubstantial sounds or appearances either. I drink to your health," and filling his cup high with wine, he said aloud--the music having by this time ceased, "To Count Frederick of Leiningen!"

His guest immediately answered the pledge, saying, "Health to the Count of Ehrenstein!" but instantly a loud voice echoed through the hall, pronouncing in a solemn tone, "Health to the Dead!"

"This is mighty strange!" exclaimed Count Frederick, setting down his cup scarcely tasted. "Methought I had seen or heard all of wonderful that this earth can produce, but now I come back to my own land to witness things stranger still.--This must be Satan's work. We must get you, good father, to lay this devil."

"Please you, my noble lord," replied the priest, whose face had turned as white as paper, "I would rather have nothing to do with him. There is the Abbey hard by, surely the good fathers there could keep the place free from spirits if they liked it.--It is their business, not mine, and as I see the lady is rising, by my troth, I will go to bed too, for I am somewhat weary with our long marches."

"It may be better for us all to do so, too," said Count Frederick; but his host pressed him to stay longer so earnestly, that he sat down for a few minutes, while Adelaide and the priest retired from the hall. The retainers of the two noblemen did not venture to follow their own inclinations and the priest's example, but, though the Lord of Ehrenstein pressed the wine hard upon them, all mirth was at an end, and whispered conversations alone went on, except between the two counts, who spoke a few words from time to time, in a louder tone, but evidently with a great effort, and at the end of about a quarter of an hour, during which there was no further interruption, Count Frederick rose,--begging his entertainer to excuse him, for retiring to rest.

All were eager to rise, and to get out of a place where none of them felt themselves in security; but Ferdinand touched his lord's arm, as, with a gloomy brow, he was following his guest from the hall, saying, in a low voice, "What is to be done with all this gold and silver, my lord? we shall never persuade the sewers to clear it away to-night."

"I know not," answered the Count, moodily, but aloud. "You must lock the door, or stay and watch."

Ferdinand fell back, and suffered the stream to pass by him, meditating thoughtfully upon how he should act. As was not uncommon in those days, there was a good deal of confusion in his mind in regard to matters of superstitious belief. Persons of strong intellect, however rude the education which they had received, were not easily induced to suppose that beings merely spiritual could have the powers and faculties of corporeal creatures, and although few doubted the fact of apparitions, being frequently seen, and even heard to speak, yet they did not believe in general that they had any power of dealing with substantial bodies. Thus, when Ferdinand thought of the events of the preceding night, although he could not doubt the evidence of his own senses, yet the fact of the banner having been changed puzzled him a good deal, and in his straightforward simplicity he asked himself, "If ghosts can carry away so heavy a thing as a banner and a banner pole, why should they not take silver tankards and golden cups?" He looked

at the different articles that strewed the tables with a doubtful eye, at first proposing to move them to a safer place himself, but upon the cross table were many large silver plates and dishes loaded with fragments of the meal, and he felt a repugnance to undertake for any one an office unsuited to his birth. To lock the door and leave the things to their fate, he could not help thinking might be merely consigning the valuable stores that were there displayed to a place from which they were never likely to return--whether above the earth or under the earth, he did not stop to inquire--and at length, after a little hesitation, he said, "I will stay and watch. They did me no harm last night, why should they harm me to-night? I can rest here as well as in my bed, and I should like to see more of these strange things.--They are awful, it is true; but yet, what has one to fear with God and a good conscience,--I will stay."

Just as he came to this resolution, he heard a returning step in the vestibule, the door leading, to which had been left open behind the retreating crowd, and the next minute the face of the jester appeared looking in. "Ha, ha! good youth," he said; "are you going to stay here, like a bait in a rat-trap, till our friends the ghosts come and nibble you? I heard what your excellent, good lord said,--a wise man! an admirably wise man! who understands the craft of princes, and leaves his followers a pleasant choice, in which they are sure to get blame or danger, in whatever way they act. What do you intend to do? lock up the door and leave the cups and tankards for devils to drink withal? or to wait and bear them company, if they choose to come and have a merry bout with you?"

"I shall stay and watch," answered Ferdinand; "I am not a steward or a scullion, to move plates and dishes, and if I leave them here Heaven only knows where they will be to-morrow!"

"Then, good faith! I'll stay and watch with you, Sir Ferdinand," answered the jester; "two fools are better than one, at any time, and one by profession and one by taste ought to be a match for a score or two of spirits, whether they be black, white, or grey."

"I've a notion, Herr von Narren," answered Ferdinand; "that you have less of a fool in you than many who would be more ashamed of the name."

"Good luck!" answered the jester, "you do my wit but little justice, youth. Who would not be a fool, when wise men do such things every day. Better to profess folly at once, of your own good will, than to have other men put the cap upon your head. A fool has one great advantage over a wise man which no one will deny him--a fool can be wise when he pleases, a wise man cannot be foolish when he likes. Oh! the bauble for ever; I would not change my motley just yet for a robe of miniver. But we'll watch, we'll watch, and we'll make ourselves comfortable too. By my faith! it gets cold of nights, or else the chilly wing of another world is flapping through this old hall. Go, get some logs, good youth, and we'll have a fire then; with our toes upon the andirons, and our chins in our palms. By the beard of St. Barnabas, we'll tell old stories of strange things gone by, till the cock shall crow before we know it. You are not afraid to leave me with the tankards, I suppose, for, on my life, I drink fair with every man, and have no itch for silver."

"Oh no, I do not fear," answered Ferdinand, "and I'll soon bring logs enough for the night. A cheerful blaze will do us no harm, and I shall be glad of your company."

Thus saying, he left the place, and from the great coffer at the entrance of the lesser hall, he soon loaded himself with sufficient wood, as he thought, to last the night. When he re-entered the great hall, he found the jester walking back from the other end towards the centre, where the fireplace stood; and as he came near, the young man inquired, "Were you talking to yourself just now, Herr von Narren?"

"Nay, good sooth, that were waste of words," answered the jester. "I was peeping through yonder keyhole, and as it is a mighty ghostly looking door, I thought I might as well tell the spirits not to disturb us, as we had much to talk about. They took it all in good part, poor things, and said nothing; though after all it would be but charity to let them come and have a warm at our good fire, for it must be cold down stairs, I fancy, and your ghost is thinly clad. Where does yon door lead to, good youth?"

"To the serfs burying vault," answered Ferdinand, "and then to the old chapel under the new one."

"Ha, ha! all convenient for the ghosts," said the jester, "but there must be a number of sad Turks amongst them to make such a noise with their atabals as they did to-night. There, you reach me down a lamp, while I lay the sticks. Trust a fool for making a fire, if he do not make it too large: then he may burn his own fingers, and the house too. We will put out half the sconces, and so, we shall have candle-light till the morning, when the sun and the tapers may wink at each other, like merry maids upon a May-day."

The fire was soon lighted, and the suggestion regarding the sconces carried into execution; after which, Ferdinand and the jester drew two stools into the wide chimney, and the latter bringing the large flagon of wine and two cups from the cross table, set the beaker down upon the hearth, saying, "We will drink and keep our spirits up."

"Nay," answered Ferdinand, "I want no wine for that purpose. I will take one cup, for I have had none to-night, and I have worked hard during the day, but if I took more, I should sleep and

not watch."

"Ay, young brains are soon addled, like a pigeon's egg," answered the jester. "And so you are Ferdinand of Altenburg?"

Ferdinand nodded his head, answering, with a smile, "No other."

"You are a bold man," said his companion, "to give me such an answer."

"How so?" demanded Ferdinand, "I must surely know who I am myself."

"If you know yourself, you are the first man that ever did," replied the jester. "Your father was a proper man."

"Indeed! did you know him?" exclaimed Ferdinand.

"Oh, dear no, not at all," said the Herr von Narren, "but my uncle Frederick told us so at supper. I knew your grand-father and your great-grandfather, and I was distantly related to his great-grandfather; for as Adam was the first of my ancestors, and all his race sprang from Eve, there was some connection between us, either by blood or matrimony--Do you remember your father?"

"No," answered Ferdinand, "I was but a mere boy when he died."

"Ay, then you were not long acquainted," said the jester. "I remember mine quite well, and how he used to tickle me with his beard--that's longer ago than you recollect, or than you could if you would, for to ask you for a long memory in your short life, would be like putting a gallon of wine into a pint stoup--But I'll tell you a story, cousin."

"What is it about?" asked Ferdinand, drinking some of the wine out of the cup he held in his hand. "Is it a story of fate, or about the Saracens, or of knightly deeds here in our own land?"

"A little of all, a little of all, cousin," answered the jester. "It's a Saturday's stew, containing fragments of all things rich and rare, with a sauce of mine own composing. Now listen and you shall hear. Once upon a time there was a prince--we'll call him prince for want of a better name; without offence too, for a prince may be a gentleman sometimes--well, this prince lived at ease in his own land--for you see he had neither wife nor child to vex him--and a very merry prince he was. Well might he be so, too, for everybody did just what he liked, and he drank the best wine and ate the best meat, and slept upon good goose-feathers which he had not the trouble of plucking; and then, moreover, he had a jester who was fit to make any heart gay. Besides this jester, he had a brother, a wise man and a thoughtful, full of all sorts of learning; for they wished to make a bishop of him, but he loved the sword better than the coif, and all he learned in the convent was Latin and Greek, and reading and writing, and Aristotle, and Duns Scotus, and to love nobody better than himself."

"Ha!" exclaimed Ferdinand, beginning to think that he perceived some drift in the man's tale, but he made no observation, and the jester continued.

"Well, the prince loved his brother very much, and they lived together in the same castle, and passed their time pleasantly; they hunted together, and they made a little war, and then they made a little peace; and while the men at arms played at mutton-bones in the court-yard, the two lords played at chess in the hall--and I can tell you, that though the brother, won the first game, the prince won the second, and the jester stood by and laughed. Merrily passed, the time, and if men would but be contented in this world, life would be like a summer day, but the brother was always urging the prince to this war or that, for the glory of their house, as he called it; and sometimes he went himself, and sometimes he stayed at home to take care of the castle, while the prince followed his advice; and then the brother one day thought it would be a good thing for the prince to go and visit Jerusalem, and that it would be honourable, as he knew something of hard blows and of leading armies, to help the knights hospitallers and other sagacious men who were fighting for the pure pleasure of the thing, to get lands which they could not keep when they had got them. And the prince thought it a very good plan; and as he had got a great number of chests full of money, he went away to sow it in the fields of Syria, and to see if it would grow there. As he had a multitude of stout young men, too, who always required bleeding in the summer time, he took them with him, but as his brother was of a cold constitution, he left him at home to keep house. Now the prince having neither wife nor child, his dear brother was his heir."

"I see," said Ferdinand. "Go on, Herr!"

"Before they went," continued the jester, "the brother had a good deal of talk with some of the prince's followers, and told them how much he loved their dear lord. He did not say that he wished him dead; oh dear, no, that was not the way at all; but he told them all that he would do if he were prince, and how he would promote them, and left Sir Satan, the king of all evil imaginations, to deal with their consciences as he might find expedient. Well, the prince went away, and took with him his jester as his chief counsellor, though he never took his counsel either, for if he had he would have staid at home. But so they went on up by the Boden Sea, and then by the Vorarlberg and through the Tyrol, kissing the Emperor's hand at Inspruck, and then came to Venice, and there they had an audience of the Duke; and at Venice they staid a long

time, for there was a fair Venetian lady that the prince loved passing well--" and the jester paused, and gazed thoughtfully into the fire for several moments.

"That has nothing to do with my tale, however," he continued, at length. "The prince went on, and after long journeying, he came to the place whither he was going; and though it was once a land flowing with milk and honey, very little honey and no milk was to be found there then. So, to keep down their appetites, he and his followers took to fighting in real earnest; one day, however, a certain officer of the prince, and a great friend of his brother's, brought him word that there were a number of Moslem in a valley not far from the castle where they were, and that if he would go out with his men, while the knights of the hospital guarded the castle, he might have them all as cheap as gudgeons. The prince had some doubts of his friend, and sent out for better intelligence, but finding that all that he said seemed very true, he got upon horseback, and sallied forth with his people. About three or four miles from the castle, however, he was suddenly surrounded and attacked on all sides by a number of the Moslem, of whom his officer had quite forgotten to tell him, though they had been watching there since daybreak. Nevertheless he fought tolerably well, considering he was a prince, and he and his men might perhaps have got out of the trap, by the force of impudence and a strong arm, if his friend the officer had not come behind him just then and struck him a gentle stroke, with something sharp, in the neck, about the place where the gorget joins the cuirass. Upon that the prince incontinent tumbled headlong off his horse; the Moslem closed in on all sides, and with their sharp scimeters sent the heads flying about like pippins shaken off a tree. All were killed or taken except one, who got through and galloped away, first carrying the news of the defeat to the knights of St. John in the castle, and then to the prince's brother at home."

"This was of course the traitor who murdered his lord," exclaimed Ferdinand, who had listened with ever-growing interest.

"Oh dear, no," replied the jester; "his friends the Moslem kept him, but thought he would be safer in two pieces, and so they separated his head from his shoulders."

"A very wise precaution," answered Ferdinand, "the true way of recompensing traitors. And what became of the jester? He was taken prisoner, I suppose?"

"Yes, he was," answered his companion. "But now listen; I am coming to the most curious part of my story, and that is the history of the prince's followers after they were dead. One clear, moonlight night, I have heard say, just as they were all lying in the rocky valley, where they had fallen, and their bones, well picked by the wild beasts of that country, were shining white amongst the bushes and large stones, there came suddenly amongst them a tall thin figure, like a shadow on the wall, through which you could see the rocks, and the branches, and the round-faced moon, just as if it had been the horn-plate of a lantern; and it stooped over the bones, and looked at them, and counted them one by one, and then it said to each fleshless head, separately,--"The man whose insinuations brought about your death, has strangled me in the vaults of his castle, though he knew that I was innocent. Rise up, then, all that were true to their prince, and come, let us to his brother's house, and plague him night and day,--at his board, and in his bed. Let us give him no rest so long as he remains upon the earth!"

"The moment he had spoken, slowly rising out of the ground, came a number of thin, shadowy figures, like himself, and they mounted calmly into the air, and floated away towards this land, just as you see a cloud rise out of the west, and soar slowly along, casting a shadow as it flies. Where they went to, and what they did, let the wise say; I know not. Only this I know, and that I heard from one who saw it, that the prince's followers, a great many years after they were killed and lying on the dry Syrian ground, rose up, man by man, each just like his own living self, and came away to their own land to torment their good lord's bad brother. One, indeed, remained behind, but he was the man who smote his prince in the neck when he was contending with the infidels; but doubtless the Moslem pickled him, for he was worth preserving, and salt meat keeps better than fresh, you know, Sir Ferdinand."

CHAPTER XII.

Ferdinand's teeth were set hard, and his hands clasped tight together as the jester's story ended, and for a moment or two he did not speak; but at length he inquired, "And how long was it ago that the good lord fell?"

"Oh, a long while," answered his companion, "long enough for young men to grow old, and for old men to wither and rot. Some twenty years ago or more. Lackaday how few twenties there are in life. Twenty and twenty are forty, and twenty are sixty: how few see the fourth twenty! Who

sees the fifth? The first begins in the infant, with a passion for milk; all mouth and no wit; and ends in the youth with a love for sweet ankles and for cherry lips; all heart and no brains. The second starts on his course like a swallow catching insects, and ends like a slough-hound upon the track of a deer: ambition flies before and distances him still. Then begins another twenty, with the hard brain and the hard heart; your man of manifold experiences, who finds no pleasure in pippins, and is mailed against the darts of a dark eye. He must have solid goods, forsooth! and so chooses gold, which will not decay; but, good faith! it matters little whether it be the possession which decays, or the possessor, whether the gilded coin rots, or the fingers that clutch it: the two part company all the same. Then comes the fourth twenty, often begun and seldom ended; and we go creeping backward, as if we would fain run away from the other end of life; top please us, straws offend us; we stumble at the same mole-hills that tripped up our infancy. Time rubs off from the score of memory what experience had written; and when the sorrowful soft gums have eaten their second pap, death takes us sleepy up and puts us quietly to bed. It was twenty years ago, good youth,—ay, that it was,—and twenty years is one of those strange jumps that are more wisely taken backwards than forwards."

"Methinks," said Ferdinand, "that though the time is so long, I know something of this story, too--". But before he could add more, a slight sort of creaking noise was heard proceeding from the end of the hall, near the chair of state. Ferdinand, whose face was already in that direction, and the jester who suddenly turned round, saw the small door which has been so often mentioned open slowly, exposing the mouth of the passage beyond.

"Ah, who have we here?" cried the jester. "Some of our friends from over the sea, I suppose;" but no one appeared, and all was silent. Both the watchers rose, and gazed for a minute or two towards the door; Ferdinand grasping the cross of his sword, but the jester showing no sign either of alarm or surprise.

"By my faith!" he exclaimed, at length, "I will see what is beyond, there. Will you come with me youth, or shall I go alone?"

"I should think from the tale you have told," answered Ferdinand, "that you know your way right well without guidance. But I will go with you, whatever is there—I have been once, and will not be stopped from going again."

"Come along, then," answered the jester. "Let us each take a lamp, cousin, for the dead must lack lights, as they always choose to walk in darkness. Why is a ghost like a flagon of wine?"

"Nay, I know not," answered Ferdinand, "and to say truth, I am in no jesting mood just now."

"Because it comes out of the vault at midnight," answered the jester, "and where it enters there it scatters men's wits about. Happy he who has none to scatter. But come along, cousin, we'll soon see whether our spirits are equal to theirs—I feel rather queer, but a mole wouldn't mind it, for he's accustomed to holes in the earth."

Thus saying, he led the way to the door, and entered the long narrow passage, Ferdinand following, and each carrying a lamp. The jester's young companion, though busied with many other thoughts, watched his movements closely, in order to obtain a confirmation or refutation of the suspicions which his tale had excited.

Those suspicions, however, were strengthened by all that the young man remarked, "Damp, damp and chilly, as a rich man's heart," murmured the jester, as he advanced; and then, as if his knowledge of the passages which they were following was not of a few hours' growth, he laid his hand upon the door, at the farther end, and without hesitation drew it towards him, choosing at once the way which it really opened. He next passed on down the stone steps, without a moment's pause to consider, merely turning round and saying, "Take care of your lamp, cousin, for a light extinguished in this world is not easily lighted again, whether it be love's lamp or life's. A puff puts them out, but a puff won't bring them in again. By the mass! the stones are somewhat slippery, and as much out of repair as a fool's head or a spendthrift's purse. I must mind my way; for here, as on ambition's ladder, a small slip would make a great tumble."

"By my faith! you seem to know your way right well, Herr von Narren," said Ferdinand, "better than I do, methinks."

"Ay, ay, folly finds the straight road, while wisdom is looking for the short cut," answered the jester. "One can't well miss their way when there is but one. But there seem no ghosts here, except the spirit of Mistress Mildew, and she is very prevalent. We shall lose our time, and get no payment for chilling our bones, if we get no better apparition than this green slime. I would give a great deal to see a ghost. I never met with one in all my travels."

"Perhaps you may be gratified to-night," rejoined Ferdinand, "for here they wander, if anywhere."

"If anywhere!" exclaimed the jester, "did any one ever hear such heretical unbelief? We know that the church supports them, because, I suppose, the poor things are too thin and unsubstantial to stand of themselves. However, here we are at the bottom; praised be Heaven's mercy in not bringing us there sooner! And here is a door. Now, marry, you and other men of shrewd wits would doubtless be looking for another, but I take the one that stands before me, the sunshine of

my darkness teaching me that that which is at hand is always nearer than that which is far off. Now let us see, it should be pulled this way, by the look of the lock and the hinges, but if it be locked, what then?" and he paused for a minute or two seeming to consider curiously the question before he proceeded to ascertain the fact.

"Come, come, Herr von Narren," said Ferdinand, "you know it opens this way well enough, and doubtless it is not locked, and if it be, I have a key that will open it."

"What! then you come hither often," said the jester, "no wonder you are less afraid of haunted places than the rest."

"I do not come here often," said Ferdinand, somewhat vexed at the incautious admission he had made, "I have been here but once in my life before, and even that I do not wish mentioned," and stretching forth his arm, he pulled back the door, before which his companion was apparently inclined to hold a long parley.

"Bless the lad's heart!" cried the jester, "he seems to think that his light words will stay in a fool's head for an hour. My brain is not bird-lime, boy, to catch your fluttering things, and put them in the trap. But now, what place is this?" and he took a step forward and looked round, holding up the lamp in his hand.

"This is the Serf's Burial-Vault," answered Ferdinand, in a low voice, remembering, with a sensation of awe that he could not overcome, the strange and fearful sights which he had there beheld.

"Hold up your lamp," said the jester, in a grave tone, "I wish to see around me."

But the darkness, as before, was too thick to be pierced for any distance by the feeble rays of the two lamps, and the next moment, to his surprise, the young man heard his companion demand aloud, "Where art thou, Walter?"

"Here!" answered a deep tone instantly; and following the sound, the jester advanced direct towards the column, to which the skeleton was bound by the chain. There he paused, and gazed upon it, as if that had been the object he sought; and the emotions which he experienced, whatever they were, seemed to overpower him, and make him forget for the time the presence of his companion. His eyes filled with tears, "Honest, and faithful, and true," he cried, "and was this the fate reserved for thee? All could be forgiven but this--This cannot, if there be justice on earth or in heaven," and bending down his head, he slightly raised the bony fingers in his own, and pressed his lips upon the mouldering joints.

There was a faint sound, as of sobbing loud, but Ferdinand's strange companion took no notice of it, and continued gazing upon the skeleton for several minutes, with a look of deep and intense thought in his eye, as it wandered up and down the fleshless limbs. Then suddenly turning away, he said, "Come on," and striding forward to the further side of the vault, he passed through the archway into the crypt or lower chapel. Taking no notice of several of the monuments on either side, and only giving a glance to the coffins, he went straight to the tomb of grey marble, on which was sculptured a lady in the attitude of prayer, and there kneeling for a few moments by the side, he seemed to busy himself in silent devotions. After which, rising he turned to Ferdinand, and said, in a mild but no sportive tone, "It is done. Go back to the hall, good youth, and wait for me there. I will not be long, and nothing will annoy you by the way."

Ferdinand might think it all strange, but yet the words of his companion seemed to have a power over him which he could not resist, and turning back he retraced his steps to the hall, where, after having closed the door, he seated himself before the fire to wait for the jester's return.

Light-hearted youth, that season of great powers and small experiences, may feel strong and deep emotions, but their influence, on the corporeal frame at least, is not very permanent. Weary with a long day's exertion, and having had little rest for the three or four nights preceding, Ferdinand's eyes felt heavy; and that pleasant languor which precedes sleep stole over his limbs. He wished to remain awake; but yet he leaned back for support against the stone-work of the wide chimney; and in a few minutes he nodded, woke up again, and then fell into sound slumber. He was awakened by a heavy hand grasping his shoulder; and looking round he saw the jester standing beside him, with the fire in its last embers, on the hearth, and the lamps burning dim.

"I must wake you, cousin," said his companion. "For we shall soon have Madam Morning winking at us with her old grey eye. Sleep is better than waking for some good reasons, but it must come to an end, coz!"

"Is it so late?" asked Ferdinand. "I thought that I had just closed my eyes!"

"Yes, that is the blessing of youth," said the jester; "he thinks not, either sleeping or waking. He dreams while he is waking, and forgets while he is sleeping, and therein has he the two best gifts that man can covet--to dream and to forget."

"I doubt not, from all I see," answered the young man, "that there are many things you would wish to forget, were it possible."

"Hark ye, cousin," said the jester; "one thing we had both better try to forget, to-wit, that we have been in those vaults together. I have a secret of yours, you have one of mine. We will each keep what we have got, and give it away to nobody, for that would be thriftless."

"Nay, I have nought to tell," answered Ferdinand; "though perhaps something to inquire, Herr von Narren. I may suspect, and I do; but I can do no more than suspect. But one thing I must ask; what you came here for? as I can know of no evil to my lord without preventing it, otherwise I am a traitor!"

"Why, what evil can I do?" asked the jester, with a smile; "what power have I? Is the fool's bauble equal to a baron's sword? Good faith! I will go to the wars, and turn out a great conqueror.--I intend your lord no harm, cousin."

"But you said there was something not to be forgiven," replied Ferdinand.

"Nor will it," said his companion, somewhat sternly; "if there be justice in Heaven; but to Heaven I leave it; and in its own good time I doubt not to see vengeance fall where it ought. What is it that you suspect?"

"That you were the follower of the late Count of Ehrenstein," answered Ferdinand, frankly; "the jester you mentioned in the tale you told; and that even now you seek to revenge the Count's death."

His companion laughed aloud. "How thy wits jump!" he said; "but in one way, like an ill-broken colt, they jump too far. I seek not to avenge that Count's death; and by all that I hold sacred, I myself will never attempt it; so let that satisfy thee, good youth."

"And yet, perhaps, I ought to inform the Count of who you are;" replied the young man, thoughtfully.

"That you cannot do," answered the jester; "and if you believe that the tale I told applies to your lord and his brother, you neither will nor ought. Vipers have viper's eggs--rogues serve rogues; and the blood in your veins would cry out against you, if you were to make your mind the bondsman of a felon. If you think my tale is true, quit this household in silence, for your own honour; if you do not believe the tale to be applicable here, remain in silence. But if you would needs speak, I will seal your lips with one word."

"Ay! what is that?" asked Ferdinand, in some surprise.

"Adelaide!" answered the jester, fixing his keen eyes upon him. "Is there nothing, good youth, that you seek to conceal as well as myself; nay, far more than I do? for I have nought to fear--you much. I care not; but that it would sadden merry meetings, and break off gay intercourse, if your good Count should know all that you know, and more.--Indeed, I promise you, that ere I depart from this neighbourhood, he shall hear the whole tale. He would less dare to wag a finger against me, protected as I am, than jump from the top of the keep; but I must choose my own time and my own way to speak, and it must not be now."

Ferdinand had coloured high when the name of Adelaide was pronounced, and now he remained silent while his companion went on in a tone so different from that which he generally used in his jester's capacity. An instant after, however, the other suddenly resumed his ordinary manner, and exclaimed, "So that is settled between the two fools who sat up all night watching for that which did not come.--Marry, had we liked it, cousin, we might have proved ourselves the wise men of the party; for with plenty of wine and good cheer, we had wherewithal to be merry and wise. Now, however, we are sorry fools; for we have neither emptied the flagons nor cleared the dishes, and vinegar will be cheap in the market if all that wine stands there much longer."

"It may serve as a bribe to bring some of the knaves in by daylight, to clear away the tables," answered Ferdinand. "There is more than one amongst them who would sell his own soul for a flagon of strong drink."

"Then is his soul dirt cheap, or a very bad one," answered the jester; "but, on my life, I believe the market price of men's souls is half a florin; for day by day we see them sold for less. The twinkle of a girl's eyes is current coin against such commodities; the pottle-pot drives a thriving trade in the mart of spirits; and two small pieces of ivory spotted with black, have nearly emptied the world's fold of its true sheep. But there comes the morning. See the panes of glass in the casement are looking grey, we shall soon have the sun up, red and blear-eyed like a drunkard who has sat up all night with the stoup. I'll hie me to bed, for my wit will want activity, and, good faith! it is getting somewhat weak in the knees."

"It must be a heavy task to be ever ready with a jest, even when the heart is sad," said Ferdinand.

"What! a heavy task to find light wit?" exclaimed the jester. "No, good youth; let a man but look at life as he ought, and the burden is easily borne. All things here are but jests; some sour, some sweet; some light, some heavy. If we cannot laugh with, we can laugh at; and but get your wit into a cantering habit, and he'll forget his grave paces and trip lightly along the road. Habit, habit, habit, cousin! everything is habit in this world. What is that makes the man eat what the

child rejects? Custom. What makes us endure a load of clothes that Heaven never intended us to wear? Custom. Put a pair of tawny leather shoes upon a child's bare feet, and he will stumble over the rushes on the floor; yet, see how gaily the youth will trip along, as if he had been born into the world booted and spurred. The eye and the ear, the tongue and the nose, all have their habits. Go into a strange land, and you will split your sides at the odd dresses of the people. Stay there a year, and you will think your own countrymen as comical. The blast of the trumpet cracks a lady's ears; ask the knight and his war horse if ever they heard sweeter music. Good sooth! I do believe, if men ate dirt and ashes for a month, they would think them better than stewed ducks or a brawn's head; and thus with me, though jesting be a sorry trade enough when the heart is full or the stomach empty, yet, either from lack of continence, or discretion, I began early, and now the jest always gets the better of the lamentation, and finds vent first. But look at the red light on the floor. It is time for night fowls to roost. Give you good morning, cousin Ferdinand, I am away to my pallet."

CHAPTER XIII.

The morning was dull and heavy, though fully risen, when Ferdinand of Altenburg was summoned to the Count's chamber; but by that time he could bear the tidings to his lord that all had been cleared away from the hall at the sacrifice of the wine which had been left there.

"Enough was left, indeed, to render the knaves half drunk," he added; "but it had the effect of making them swear, by all they held sacred, that they will never shun the hall again, if it were haunted by whole troops of goblins."

"We shall not need to try them, Ferdinand," replied the Count. "We must change our plan, good youth. We must not have our food poisoned by doubts and fears."

The Count spoke thoughtfully, pausing when he had done; and Ferdinand replied, "I am glad you have taken such a resolution; my good lord. It is true, I fear these things not; but still it is high time that something should be done to inquire into this matter, or to remove it. You have yourself now heard, and I have seen strange things, of which, I trust, some holy man, some priest of a good and saintly life, may be able to free us."

"No, no," replied the Lord of Ehrenstein, "we will have no priests, lad, nor monks either. They can do nought in this or aught else, but in crafty policy, where the hundred-headed and perpetual monster sets all her everlasting wits to work. I know their ways right well, for I was bred to be one of them.--No, no! We will have no priests to meddle and to babble here, and tell the broad world that I was plagued with spirits at my very hearth. That were an old woman's remedy, and I will not submit myself to such were there none other in the world. Not so, not so will we set to work; but for the future we will take our meals in separate parties: some in the lesser hall, some in the two rooms on either side--but what makes you look so dull, as if your mind were roaming to other things?--You were not disturbed, you say?"

"Oh no, my lord, this last night I saw nothing," answered Ferdinand; "but I am weary and feel heavy eyed, having slept but little for several nights."

"Well, hie thee to bed then for a while," replied the Count; but he was not yet satisfied; for there were signs rather of thought than of slumber in the young man's face; and with suspicions, aroused of he knew not well what, he resolved to watch him more carefully.

The day passed nearly without events. The whole party seemed relieved, when they found that the haunted hall was no more to be visited. The Count and his noble guest walked for a great part of the morning on the battlements, in earnest conversation; the knights and soldiers amused themselves with the sports and games of the day in the courts and chambers, and the hour of noon brought with it the usual meal. During the whole morning, Adelaide and Ferdinand did not meet; and even at dinner, by the Count's arrangement, the young man was sent to superintend another room, where a table was spread for some of the chief officers of both households. One glance as he passed through the hall was all that he obtained, and he thought that Adelaide's eyes looked anxious. Count Frederick was standing on one side of the lady, and his young follower, Martin of Dillberg, on the other, as the lover crossed the hall; and on the face of Dillberg there were smiles and sweet looks, which made Ferdinand's breast feel warm with sensations he had never before experienced. Doubt or suspicion, in regard to Adelaide herself, he could not entertain; but yet jealousy has many stages, and Ferdinand hated Count Frederick's follower heartily from that moment. He felt--or fancied that they were rivals, and perhaps, in the whole range of bitter emotions, there is none more painful than that which we endure, when we know that even for a time a rival has the ear of her we love. At the meal, he tried to be cheerful

as well as courteous, and though it cost him a great effort to conceal his uneasiness, yet his manner was so pleasing to all, that he rose high in the opinion of Count Frederick's train, and even at the table, almost within his own hearing, comparisons were made between him and Martin of Dillberg not very favourable to the latter.

"I love him not," said one; "I never have; and the more I see of him the less I like him. Were he like this young squire, one could understand our lord's favour for him."

"Ay," answered an elder man to whom he had been speaking, "our lord will rue that favour one of these days. He is cunning and false, ever making his own tale good, and seeking to injure others. I never saw one yet, who was so artful and malicious when he was young, that did not commit some treachery before he was old."

"Ay, the Count is beginning to know him, I believe," rejoined the first, "saw you not how he chid him for the falsehood he told of Sigismund. He would have done better to send him away at once; but he bears with him because his father was a good soldier and an honest man."

"Ay, and his mother a devil incarnate," answered the other. "She broke his father's heart, betrayed his honour, and ruined him; and this youth is her very image."

In such comments, more than one at the table indulged very freely; but Ferdinand heard them not, for he was conversing somewhat eagerly with one of Count Frederick's younger knights, though the subject was of no greater interest than the history of the jester. Ferdinand sought for information to confirm or remove the suspicions he entertained, but he could obtain little, and indeed his companion did not seem disposed to communicate much. "I was with a different band," he said, in answer to one of the young man's questions, "when this man joined the Count."

"Then he did join him in the Holy Land?" asked Ferdinand.

"I believe so," was the reply, "but I know nought as certain. He might have known the Count before."

"I have heard he saved your leader's life," said the young man.

"Yes, so they say," rejoined the knight. "I was not present, and know nothing of it."

All further questions were equally fruitless, and Ferdinand turning the conversation to the subject which the others had been discussing, inquired, "Who is Martin of Dillberg, whom your lord seems also to love right well?"

"Nay, that is a mistake," answered the knight. "He shows him favour, it is true; but I have twice seen the question hang in the balance whether my lord would not strike his head off, once for taking a jewel off a dead man's hand, and once for betraying counsel. But he is as cunning as a fox, and raised a doubt, by one means or another, as to whether he did not intend to carry the ring to the widow. The other fault was forgiven on the score of youth, but with a warning, that if he so offended again, death would be his doom without reprieve."

"Perchance he is valiant in arms," said Ferdinand; "I have ever heard that Count Frederick will forgive much to gallant men."

His companion smiled and shook his head, saying, "He is no great seeker of renown, this youth. Yet he is brave after a certain fashion too. There are some men, and he is one of them, who would risk ten times the danger of a battle-field, to accomplish a small matter cunningly. He seems to enjoy his own art so much, that if it costs his life he must practise it, especially if it be to the injury of others."

"A pleasant comrade in a band like yours," rejoined Ferdinand; and there the conversation dropped.

The meal was drawing near its conclusion, when some noise was heard in the adjoining hall, of a different kind from that which had preceded, though in those days, as often at present, the hour of dinner was a noisy one. The Count of Ehrenstein's voice could be distinguished asking questions with angry vehemence, and every now and then another answering, while the tones of Count Frederick joined in from time to time even more sharply.

"What is the matter in there, Henry?" asked Ferdinand, as one of the sewers passed through, bearing some dishes.

"A party of Venetian traders, Sir, have been stopped, and plundered beyond Anweiler," replied the man, "and it seems they had gold with them belonging to Count Frederick; so they have sent up to seek redress and help. One of them has been killed, they say."

"Who has done it?" asked the young gentleman. "I thought such bands had been put down."

"Oh, it is the Baron of Eppenfeld," said the sewer; "he will never give up that trade; and his place is so strong, it will be difficult to force him."

Thus saying, he went on, and the thoughts of all present turned to the results that were likely

to ensue from the event that had just occurred. "Count Frederick will not be long out of the saddle," observed one of his attendants; "it is not well to pull the beard of an old lion."

"I doubt we shall have enough here to right the affair," rejoined an old soldier; "it is unlucky that one-half of the band marched on."

"But the Count of Ehrenstein will not suffer his friend to go unaided," answered Ferdinand. "He can call out two hundred men at arms."

"That would indeed be serviceable," said the knight, "and doubtless he will do it; for I have heard that this gold belonged to the late Count, and was found safely treasured in a castle of the Knights' Hospitallers on the coast."

Ferdinand was about to answer, when old Seckendorf put in his head, exclaiming, "Here, here, Ferdinand, the Count would speak with you;" and instantly rising, the young man followed into the neighbouring hall. He found the two Counts apparently much excited, speaking together eagerly, and a tall grave looking elderly man in foreign garments standing beside them, occasionally joining in their conversation, which went on for some time after Ferdinand of Altenburg had entered.

At length the Count of Ehrenstein turned towards him, saying, "Here is an occasion for you, Ferdinand. The Baron of Eppenfeld has waylaid these merchants on their way hither,—from good information of their coming it would seem, but how obtained, Heaven knows. He has seized all their baggage, and in it treasure belonging to me. It is judged but courteous to suppose that he is ignorant, that I am interested, and therefore, instead of going in arms to demand reparation at once, I send to claim that all be instantly restored to these noble merchants, and that compensation be given for the death of one of their valets and the wounds of another: that compensation to be awarded by myself and Count Frederick here. You shall be my messenger; take with you ten men at your choice, and depart at once, so that you be back before morning. If Eppenfeld will restore all and make compensation, well; if not, defy him in my name and in that of Count Frederick. The task is one of honour, though of some danger; but I know it will not be less pleasant to you on that account."

"Thank you, my good lord," replied Ferdinand; "but let me know my errand fully. If the Baron seeks to delay his reply, how am I to act? It is now one of the clock, ride as hard as I will, I shall not reach his castle gates till five; and he may say that he will give me an answer in the morning."

"Stay not an hour," replied the Count. "I would not have you, or any of your troop, either break bread or taste wine within his gates, till the answer is given. If he says Yes, you may refresh yourselves and the horses. If he says No, return at once, and rest at Anweiler. If he seeks delay, give him half an hour, and tell him such are our express commands. Now away, good youth, to make ready. You must all go armed."

"I will do your will to the best, my lord," answered Ferdinand, and with a glance to the pale cheek of Adelaide, he was turning to leave the hall, when Count Frederick called him back, and drawing him to the window, said, in a low voice, "I would fain have you, my dear lad, discover, if possible, how this worthy knight obtained intelligence of the merchants' journey. I must leave the means to yourself; but I have my reasons for the inquiry—I fear this may be a dangerous expedition for you," he added.

"More full of danger than honour, my good lord," answered Ferdinand. "Small chance of fair fighting: much of being caught like a rat in a trap. But I will do my best, and have nought but to obey."

Thus saying, he left the hall, not daring to turn his eyes to Adelaide again; and the party he left soon broke up, Count Frederick saying he had a vow to perform at the chapel of the Virgin, and that he would ride out to fulfil it between that hour and supper time.

Choosing his men from those on whom he could best depend, Ferdinand descended for a moment to the court, gave orders for the horses to be saddled, and all prepared without a moment's delay, and then mounted to his own chamber to arm himself in haste. He had nearly done, and heard gay voices speaking on the battlements far below, when someone knocked gently at his door.

"Come in," cried the young man; and Bertha appeared, with a face half frightened, half playful.

"Your lady wishes to speak with you for a moment before you go, Sir Scapegrace," said the girl in a low tone. "She is in the corridor below, and all the rest are out of the way for a minute or two, so make haste;" and without more words she hastened away, leaving the door ajar.

Ferdinand lost no time; but, as ever is the case when one attempts to abridge a necessary process, one thing went wrong, and then another, so that he was longer than he would have been had he been less in haste. At length, however, all was complete; and hurrying down, he found Adelaide waiting anxiously near the door of her own apartments, with Bertha at a little distance towards the top of the great stairs. As soon as she saw him, the lovely girl sprang towards him.

"Oh, Ferdinand," she said, "I have longed to speak with you all the morning; but the castle has

been so full, that it would have been madness to attempt it; and now you are going whence you may, perchance, never return. At all events, you cannot be back in time to do what is required."

"Fear not for me, dear one," answered Ferdinand, "neither imagine that I will linger for a moment by the way, if Adelaide has aught to command me."

"Nay, it is not I who command," replied his beautiful companion with a faint blush, "it is Father George who requires that you and I together shall be at the chapel to-night, some time between midnight and dawn."

"Indeed!" said Ferdinand, "does he explain for what object?"

"No. Three or four words written in a billet, closely sealed, were all the intimation I have had," answered Adelaide.

"And would you go if it were possible, dear girl?" inquired her lover.

"I will do whatever he directs," replied the lady.

"Then, if there be a means of any kind, I will be back;" said Ferdinand. "Do not retire to rest till all hope of my coming is over for the night; but, as perchance, I might be detained, it were better to send down Bertha to the good priest to let him know, that if not there to-night, we will come to-morrow night without fail, if I be alive and free."

As he spoke, Bertha raised her hand suddenly as a warning, and Adelaide was drawing back to her own apartments; but Ferdinand detained her, saying, "Do not seem alarmed--'tis our own hearts make us fear. I may well bid you adieu as I should any other lady;" and bending his head over her hand, he kissed it, saying aloud, "Farewell, lady--God shield you ever!"

"Farewell, Ferdinand," said Adelaide, in a tone that somewhat wavered; and, at the same moment, Bertha drew nearer, and Martin of Dillberg entered the corridor from the great stairs. His eyes were turned instantly towards the two lovers, and although Bertha was by this time close to them with waitingmaid-like propriety, yet the youth's lip curled with a smile, of not the most benevolent aspect.

"Farewell, pretty Bertha," said Ferdinand, as soon as he saw Count Frederick's follower; and then, passing him with very slight salutation, he hurried away, while Adelaide retired at once to her own chamber. The men and horses were not yet prepared; and as Ferdinand was standing armed in the court waiting for their appearance, the Count, with his guest, the priest, and the jester, passed by. The Count's eye rested on him, but he did not address him; and as the party walked on, the young man heard the Lord of Ehrenstein reply to some question of Count Frederick's: "Yes, he is always prompt and ready--brave as a lion, too, fearing nothing, living or dead; but there has come over him to-day a sort of dull gloom which I do not understand."

Ferdinand heard no more; and in five minutes after he was in the saddle, and at the head of his troop, wending onward on his expedition. Crossing the valley, he followed the course of the opposite hills, as if he were journeying to Dürkheim, till he had passed the Abbey about two miles, where a small village, commanding a beautiful view of the basin of the Rhine, presented itself; and turning through it to the right, he was pursuing his way, when a loud voice from a blacksmith's forge called him by name; and he checked his horse for a moment.

"Whither away, Sir? whither away?" asked Franz Creussen, coming forth with his enormous arms bare to the shoulders.

"To Eppenfeld," answered Ferdinand, "the Baron has waylaid some merchants bringing gold to the Count; and I am sent to ask him to give it up,--I cannot stay to tell you more, Franz, but doubt I may stay longer where I am going, and perchance need arms as strong as yours to get me out."

"Likely enough," replied the giant; "when come you back, if they will let you?"

"As fast as my horse can carry me," answered the young man, and galloped on, along one of the narrow hill paths that led towards Anweiler, with an unrivalled view of the whole Palatinate below him on the left, and, on the right, the mountains of the Haard, with their innumerable castles, abbeys, and monasteries, crowning every peak, and barring every gorge. When he reached the road from Landau to Zweibrücken, near Anweiler, instead of following it far, he turned away again before he had gone on a quarter of a mile, in the direction of Weissenburg, and entered a dark and gloomy looking valley, where rocks and trees were far more plentiful than churches or human habitations. Closing in on either side, the high hills left but a narrow space for the dell as it wound on, till at length, at a spot where the basin extended a little, a tall rock rose up in the centre, covered with wood wherever the roots could find earth to bear them, and crowned with walls and towers above. Ferdinand gave his horse the spur, and in a few minutes more stood before the gates of Eppenfeld.

CHAPTER XIV.

Before the small chapel in the wood, below the castle of Ehrenstein, there was, as I have said, an open space of about half an acre. The trees encroached upon it here and there, rendering the boundary-line broken and irregular, detracting nought from the sylvan beauty of the scene. On the contrary, the variety was pleasant to the eye; and the old oaks and beeches, which, starting out before their fellows, obtruded on the soft dry turf, rendered the sight more agreeable by depriving it of all formality. It looked like a space for fairy revels; and in truth, though the fathers, if they had seen any of the little good people present, might have sent them roughly to some other quarters, took no slight pleasure, as was commonly the case with the monks, in the charms of the spot where they had fixed one of their buildings, and would rather have forfeited a great deal than have cut down one of the trees which formed the great ornament of the place. The varied colours of the spring, the summer, and the autumn, afforded much delight to the good old men. The sunshine, streaming through the green leaves, was like the return of the summer of life to the winter of their age; and it was the boast of the Lord Abbot--though he was not otherwise than fond of venison--that neither stag, nor roe, nor fallow-deer, had ever been slaughtered in those woods by his command. Thus the wild creatures of the forest, who have more sense than we give them credit for, looked upon the wood, within two or three hundred yards of the chapel, as a place of refuge, a sort of sanctuary; and the open space between the trees and the building as a play-ground for their evening hours. The beams of the full day, however, were pouring over the blades of grass, and tinging with bright yellow the beech leaves above, when Count Frederick of Leiningen, with a small party behind him, drew in his rein at the chapel door. A groom sprang to his stirrup, and, dismounting more lightly than from his age one would have judged possible, he entered the chapel and bent his knee for some moments before the altar, in prayer; then rising, he advanced towards the door of the little wing inhabited by Father George, and, after knocking at it with his knuckles, opened it and entered, beckoning the jester to follow. The good priest was seated at a table reading, but he rose, when, by air and manner, more than even by dress, he perceived the high rank of his visitor. For a moment or two neither of the three spoke, and the eye of the monk ran from the face of Count Frederick to that of the jester, resting upon the latter long and steadfastly, with a sort of inquiring look, as if he recognised features which he had seen in times of old, and yet had some difficulty in assuring himself that they were the same which he had beheld before the scorching blast of time had passed over them.

Count Frederick was the first who spoke, saying, "You do not remember me, good father, though we have met often in early days, and more than once some ten years ago; but I can easily forgive your forgetfulness, for, good faith, the suns of Syria and Africa are not the greatest beautifiers of man's person, and the change must be somewhat rueful. You are little altered, since last I saw you; more silver than sable in your hair now, it is true, but still the features are the same."

"I remember you well, my good lord," replied the priest; "though you are greatly changed, I own. Yet here is one I should remember better, methinks; for, if my eyes deceive me not strangely, we have met more often;" and as he spoke he laid his hand upon the jester's arm.

"I know not which is the greatest deceiver," cried the jester, with a laugh; "a man's eyes or his ears; the one cheats him more often, the other more deeply; but, by my faith! I know not why my lord called me here. If you be old friends you will have old tales to tell, and I never yet could listen patiently to an ancient story, or to the wit and mirth of sixty years and upwards. My own jests are sufficient for me, so, I pray you, jolly priest, don't flout me."

Father George bent down his eyes thoughtfully on the ground, and then shook his head somewhat mournfully, but looking up suddenly at length, he said, addressing Count Frederick, "Well, my good lord, I am glad at all events to see you safe returned. Have you any commands for me?"

"None, good father, none," replied Count Frederick. "I come but to ask a question or two.--I have found at the castle a youth named Ferdinand of Altenburg, who is he?"

"Methinks, noble lord," replied Father George; "that the name is enough to show you that he is of a noble race and kin; not so rich as he might be, perhaps, but still with the hope of rising in the world. He was my ward, and is now in the train of the Count of Ehrenstein, serving him well I trust, for he was always well disposed and honourable."

"So is a cat," replied the jester, "rather thievishly disposed towards mice, but still an honourable beast, as the world goes, with a mighty soft tread, and a sleek skin well smoothed."

"But he is thievishly disposed to no one," answered Father George.

"By my faith! that is saying much for any man under ninety," rejoined the jester; "for there are

many kinds of thievishness, which assault us at different stages of this world's journey; and I have seldom met with the male thing of twenty, or thereabouts, that would not steal a smile from beauty, or a heart if he could get it, in a very roguish manner."

"That is lawful robbery," said the priest, with a smile, "against which there is no commandment."

"Ay, if the church have its dues," cried the jester, "then things are easily managed; but Heaven help me! I blame not the youth, nor call him a cat either; I but said that Grimalkin is as honest as he."

"But not so bold, so brave, and so true," answered Father George, "else he belies his teaching."

"He seems brave enough, in truth," answered Count Frederick, "for he is even now gone to put his head into a lion's mouth."

"Ah! how is that?" exclaimed Father George, in evident surprise and alarm; "I knew not that he was going anywhere."

"He has gone to beard the Baron of Eppenfeld in his hold," answered the Count; "you can judge better, my good friend, what reception he is likely to meet with than I can."

"Comfortable lodging and good food," replied the jester, "if nothing worse; but clean straw, and bread and water may serve a man's turn very well, if it be not on compulsion. Compulsion is the salad of bitter herbs, that makes all a man's meat have a hard flavour."

"And when does he propose to come back?" asked the monk, without noting Herr von Narren's words.

"As soon as he can ride thither and return," said Count Frederick in reply; "he may be back by nine, I should think."

"He must have help in case of need," replied Father George, thoughtfully.

"That he shall have beyond all doubt," answered the nobleman; "depend upon it, no wrong shall befall him without vengeance from my hand."

"Ay, that is the way with all these great lords," exclaimed the jester; "vengeance is a part of their creed. Now a fool or a serf would think it better to stop evil deeds than to punish them: if I were to kill your horse, uncle, the beast would not be a bit better off for knowing that my head would pay the penalty. I say, let those who can, stop the doing of that which is amiss, and then there will be no occasion for avenging it afterwards."

He spoke with a good deal of emphasis, and then turned round to the lattice-window and looked out, while the priest and his noble visitor conversed for some few minutes apart.

From time to time the eye of Count Frederick's strange companion wandered from the space immediately opposite the chapel, and from the group of attendants and men-at-arms it contained, up towards the castle, with a marking and significant glance. Whether by accident or design, I know not, but the chapel had been so built, that the window of that room, although it could not command the whole extent of the road, caught glimpses of it, even after the trees crossed it, at every fifty or sixty yards along the whole extent, and after gazing forth for two or three minutes, something seemed to catch and arrest the man's attention; for he suddenly smiled, laid his finger on his temple, and then, after having watched for a moment or two more, turned quickly round, exclaiming, "Give you good day," uncle Frederick; "I am away for a pot of honey, I see there;" and out of the door he strode without awaiting an answer. Hurrying up the hill, without mounting his horse, he had just passed the first turning in the wood, when he suddenly came upon the pretty maid Bertha, tripping down with a rapid step, and a cheek somewhat flushed.

"A fair afternoon to you, sweet lady," said the jester, taking her hand; "whither away so fast?"

"I am going to tell my beads at the chapel," said Bertha, evidently discomposed.

"A pious undertaking," cried the jester, "and easily performed, too, if there were none but pigeons in this world; but doves will meet with hawks, pretty mistress, when they fly out alone; and if I mistake not, something has ruffled your feathers."

Bertha laughed, blushing, and replied: "You saw him, then, Sir?"

"I saw some one lay hold of you roughly," answered the jester; "but, in truth, my eyes are somewhat dim; for the passing of years will scratch the horn lantern, and though I came out to help you in case of need, I could not distinguish who it was."

"One of your good lord's followers," answered Bertha; "but it is no matter, I trust he will be less saucy henceforth, for I threatened to tell of him."

"If you threatened to tell and don't tell, pretty maid, be you sure that he will read the riddle to

his own advantage. Otherwise, he will be as great a fool as I am, and I will leave him my cap and bauble for a legacy."

Just as the jester was uttering these words, the youth Martin of Dillberg appeared coming down with a stealthy step; and Bertha's companion exclaimed, "Ha! ha! Here we have him, and no tale told. For this he shall be punished enough."

"Nay, I beseech you," cried Bertha, "do him no harm! He is a saucy boy; but he will not offend again."

"He has offended often enough already," answered the jester, "but fear not, pretty maid; I will not deal roughly. I will but set the dwarf upon him, and for the next three days he will lead the life of a strange fowl in a farm-yard--but see! as soon as his eye lights upon me, he creeps away amongst the trees. That youth will fall upon some evil thing before he is done. Now hie thee on to the chapel, and tell thy beads in peace; though, Heaven help us! if all the love tales were counted that lie under a rosary, they would drown the paters and aves, I fear."

"I am going to tell no love tale," answered Bertha, colouring and walking on. "I wish I had a love tale to tell."

The jester laughed, and followed towards the chapel, saying, "It must be a luckless place this castle of Ehrenstein, not to furnish a pretty maiden with such a bosom-friend. Perhaps your sweet mistress cannot say the same."

"I never pry into my mistress's affairs," cried Bertha, "I know nothing of them."

But the jester's keen eye was upon her as she spoke, and he exclaimed with a provoking smile, "Ha! ha! thy warm cheek is as red as thy warm lip, fair maid; and, on my troth, I can forgive Martin of Dillberg for tasting both. Why, you tell-tale, if you guard your face no better, it is useless putting a bridle on your tongue."

"It is because you tease me," answered Bertha, petulantly; "I declare, Martin of Dillberg was better than you are, so I shall hurry on, and do without your company."

The jester followed, but not very rapidly; and when Bertha saw the horsemen standing at the chapel gate, she paused, and seemed to hesitate; but then taking heart of grace, she hastened forward again, and, without looking to the right or left, approached the shrine.

Her orisons were somewhat long, for the Count, and the jester, who had again entered the good priest's cell, remained there for half an hour, and when they came forth and rode on towards the Abbey, Bertha was still at prayer.

CHAPTER XV.

We are all well aware that there are certain of man's infirmities which may be turned to serve his own purposes when the exercise of his faculties might be dangerous or inconvenient. It may sometimes be pleasant to have no eyes, sometimes to have no ears; and we have known instances where it was believed judicious in certain parties to have no legs, till they were found for them by other parties interested in the progress of the recusants. Now the lords of Eppenfeld occasionally judged it expedient to be extremely hard of hearing; and in order to favour this infirmity as far as possible, no bell was attached to their gates, though these tinkling instruments had long before been introduced into common use, as the means of summoning porters or warders to answer the inquiries of the stranger, or to open the doors to the visitor. It would seem that they were fond of the usages of antiquity, for the only means provided for making one's self heard before their castle, was the long disused one of a large horn, suspended under the arch of an outwork in advance of the drawbridge, the sound of which might be heard or not by those within, as they liked.

The Baron of Eppenfeld was seated at table on the evening of the day of which we have just been speaking, though the hour of dinner was long past, and that of supper not yet arrived. Human nature, however, is the same in all ages. We may smooth, and shape, and polish, and gild the stone, but the material remains unchanged, and the same propensities and habits become apparent whenever circumstances call them into action. Lightly won, and lightly spent, was as true a maxim in those days as in our own; and the predatory noble, or robber knight, was as sure to wind up any successful expedition with revelry and drunkenness, as the wrecker, the smuggler, or the footpad of modern times. The Baron of Eppenfeld had made a glorious sweep of the goods of the Venetian merchants; he had obtained more gold by an enterprise of little

difficulty or danger, than, had ever warmed his coffers before; and, consequently, the choice vintages of his cellars--though I cannot say they were the produce of his own vineyards--were doomed to flow for himself and his soldiery, in honour of the happy event. He was revelling then with the wine cup in his hand, when the sound of the horn before the gates made itself heard in the hall. He and his companions had drunk for many an hour, and the eyes of several of the worthy gentlemen present were growing somewhat glassy and unmeaning. The Baron's own head, however, seemed made of the same cast-iron materials as his frame, and the quantity was infinite which he could absorb without any apparent effect.

"Ha!" he cried, as soon as the sound met his ear; "go and look through the loophole, Stephen, and see who that is blowing the horn."

The man to whom he spoke, rose, and carried his flushed countenance and watery eyes to a loophole in the neighbouring tower, and after an absence of about two minutes, returned to say, in not very distinct tones,--"It is a youth, on horseback."

"That young villain!--come for his share, I dare say," said the Baron. "Well, we'll give him his share, and take it from him afterwards. He has helped us to skin his lord, and so it is all fair for us to skin him."

A peal of laughter from his followers succeeded to this remarkably just and honourable observation of the Baron of Eppenfeld, in the midst of which the man Stephen grumbled forth, two or three times before he could make himself heard--"This is not he, my lord. This fellow's taller by a hand's breadth, and he has got a number of knechts after him; so you had better look to yourself. I could not count them, for they wavered about before my eyes as if they were dancing."

"That was because you are drunk, swine!" replied the Baron. "Knechts!--what brings he knechts here for? Go you out, Fritz, and look at them through the grate, and see how many there are, and what they seek, if you can divine by any token, without speaking to them. Don't let yourself be seen before you come and tell me. Heaven send it may be a party of rich pilgrims come to seek shelter at Eppenfeld! We will treat them hospitably, and send them lightly on their way."

"If they're pilgrims, they're pilgrims in steel coats," answered Stephen; while the man whom his lord called Fritz, hurried off to take a better survey.

These tidings did not seem to please his lord, for the Baron's brow knit, and after looking two or three times towards the door of the hall, he was in the act of rising to go out, when his second messenger returned, saying with a laugh, "It's Ferdinand of Altenburg, whom you have seen with the Count of Ehrenstein; and with him he's got ten men of the castle."

"Are you sure of the youth?" demanded the Baron. "We must have no mistakes, though we can manage ten men well enough; ay, or forty, if they send them."

"Oh, I am quite sure," answered Fritz; "for he has got his beaver up, and I can see his face as well as I can see yours."

"What can the Count want?" murmured Eppenfeld to himself. "Well, we are good friends enough, and he is not very particular as to what he does himself, so let them in, and bring the youth straight hither.--Take away these cups and tankards, and make the place look orderly. Then let every drunken man hie to his own sty, for if the good Count wants help with the strong hand, we may perchance have to mount before nightfall."

With a good deal of scrambling and confusion, the board was cleared, and laid edgeways at the side of the hall, the tressels, the cups, the flagons, and all the other implements which they had employed in the revel were hastily removed, and after the horn at the gates had been sounded loudly once or twice, Fritz, and two or three of the more sober of the soldiery, went out to give admission to the followers of the lord of Ehrenstein.

In the mean while the Baron walked up and down the hall, considering gravely the question of what the Count of Ehrenstein could want with him--for those were days when men were so much accustomed to plunder and wrong each other, that suspicion mingled with almost every transaction of life, and neither rogues nor honest men ever trusted each other without a doubt. Before his cogitations came to an end, Ferdinand--having left the horses, and several of his followers to take care of them, in the outer court--was ushered into the hall, with five stout men at his back; and advanced at once towards the Baron, through the different groups of somewhat wild and fierce looking retainers, who formed the favourite household of the good lord of Eppenfeld.

"Well, good youth, what do you want with me?" asked the Baron. "If I am not much mistaken, you are young Ferdinand of Altenburg, who was page some years since to my fair cousin the Count of Ehrenstein.--Whom do you follow now?"

"The same, my lord," replied Ferdinand, "and the Count has sent me to you with his friendly greeting; bidding me say, that he learns from the complaint of certain Venetian merchants, that some of your people, not knowing that they were journeying to the Castle of Ehrenstein, or that

the treasure they carried was his, have stopped and plundered them on the highway from Zweibrücken. He bids me now tell you, however, that such is the case, and requires not only that the whole shall be instantly restored, but that compensation shall be made for the injury which your people have inflicted upon these merchants and their followers."

Here the Baron of Eppenfeld interrupted him by a loud laugh, "On my life," he cried, "thou art a bold youth to bring me such a message!"

"That message is not yet done, my lord," answered Ferdinand, coolly. "The Count bade me add, that the compensation to the merchants is to be awarded by himself and Count Frederick of Leiningen, now sojourning with him at Ehrenstein, and commanded me to require an answer at your hands without delay, that he may take measures accordingly."

The Baron gazed at him, as if in surprise at his audacity; but yet at the mention of the name of Count Frederick of Leiningen as a guest in the Castle of Ehrenstein, a shade of doubt seemed to come over his face; and when the youth had done, he turned abruptly from him, and paced up and down the hall for a minute. Then, stopping again as suddenly, he replied, "If I say bluntly, No, what have you to answer then?"

"My task then would be," answered Ferdinand, "to defy you in the name of my good lord and of Count Frederick, and to tell you that they will be before your gates in arms ere four-and-twenty hours are over."

The Baron bit his lip. "Tell them that Eppenfeld is high," he answered; "tell them that its lord wears a sword that has made braver men than they are skip--tell them--yet stay, I will consider this, and consult with my people. You shall lodge here to-night and sup with me, and perhaps ere to-morrow I shall consider my old friendship with your lord rather than my anger at his rash message."

"I fear that cannot be, my lord," answered Ferdinand; "I am neither to eat, to drink, to sleep, or spare the spur for more than half an hour, till I bear back your answer."

"By my faith! then, no other shall you have," cried the Baron, vehemently; "and if you seek more, you shall have it in a dungeon of the castle.--Ay, tell the Count what I have said; and you may add that he had better mind his own affairs, and meddle not with my booty, or he may find that I will not only have revenge in arms, but other retribution which will fall heavier still: tell him I know things which, though he thinks they have been buried deep for well nigh twenty years, may yet pull him down from where he stands, and give him to the emperor's headsman. So much for the Count of Ehrenstein."

"And what for Count Frederick of Leiningen," asked Ferdinand, not at all daunted by the fierce looks and tones of the Baron. "I was equally charged by him to defy you."

"Good faith! your impudence well nigh makes me laugh," exclaimed the Baron. "What for Count Frederick of Leiningen? Why, tell His Highness that I thank him gratefully for the good prize he put into my hands, and that he shall have the share stipulated by his lad, Martin of Dillberg. You may say, moreover, that I was very cautious," the Baron continued, with a bitter sneer, "and attended to all the warnings given me. I never meddled with the men till they were on my own land, without a pass from me. If they will do such things, they must bear the consequences. I have taken my toll of them, and I shall keep it, if all the counts in the empire said me Nay. So now begone, and remember that you tell both my loving cousins in each other's presence, what I have said in answer to their messages."

Ferdinand of Altenburg made no reply, but took a step back towards the door, very doubtful, to say the truth, whether he would be permitted to reach it. He was suffered to pass uninterrupted, however; but the moment he had quitted the hall, the man Fritz, who acted as the Baron's lieutenant, sprang to his lord's side, and murmured eagerly some words of advice. Those who were around did not hear all that he said, but some broken parts of sentences were audible, such as, "Let us have four-and-twenty hours at least--never stand a strict leaguer so badly provided--bring the beeves from the wood; and call in all the men.--We can do it in a minute--here are only ten with him."

The Baron nodded his head, and made a sign with his hand; and Fritz, beckoning to the rest of the men to follow, hurried out into the court-yard.

Ferdinand of Altenburg had one foot in the stirrup, when the Baron's lieutenant approached him; and the rest of the men of Ehrenstein were scattered about--some mounting their horses, others mounted. The gate was open and the drawbridge down, and not more than fourteen or fifteen of the soldiers of Eppenfeld were in the court when Fritz entered it. Proceeding cautiously, therefore, he touched Ferdinand's arm lightly, saying, "My good lord would fain speak with you for a moment farther, young Sir."

"I must not stay any longer," answered Ferdinand, and was in the act of springing into the saddle, when Fritz, seeing a number of others following from the hall, threw himself suddenly upon him, and endeavoured to pinion his arms. Ferdinand was younger and more active, though perhaps not so strong; and with a blow of his gauntlet struck the man down, freeing himself from his grasp. A scene of struggling confusion succeeded, in the course of which the young man and

all his followers but two were overpowered by the superior numbers of their opponents, and carried back as captives into the castle. The other two were men who had already mounted, and who, at the first sign of this unequal strife pushed their horses towards the gates, dashed over the drawbridge, and took their way at full speed down the valley.

In the mean time, Ferdinand of Altenburg was dragged back into the castle, but instead of being taken to the hall, was hurried along the passages, and down a narrow flight of steps, to a small room or cell, which perhaps did not exactly deserve the name of a dungeon, for it was actually above the ground, but which was dim, damp, and inconvenient enough. In those days, however, the things which we are accustomed to look upon as absolute necessities, were merely luxuries, and people of very high station fared hard and lay harder; so that a pallet bed, a narrow chamber, a little light, and a stone floor, were hardships not aggravated to the mind of Ferdinand by a contrast with any great delicacy of nurture.

He did not remonstrate with those who bore him along, for he was well aware that by so doing, he would only waste his breath; and indeed he said nothing, for threats he knew could only aggravate the rigours of his imprisonment, and he looked upon patience as a sovereign balm for all such misfortunes as those to which he was now subjected. Neither did he resist at all, from the moment it became evident that resistance would be in vain; and thus, though he was dragged along at first with some degree of violence, the men who held him soon slackened their speed, and relaxed their grasp. When they had pushed him into the cell, they stood leaning against the lintels of the door, gazing at him for a moment before they shut it; and the man Fritz, whose right cheek and eye displayed very remarkable evidence of the strength with which Ferdinand had struck him, seemed now not a little surprised at the calmness and good-humour with which the young gentleman bore his fate.

"Well you take it vastly quietly, Master Ferdinand of Altenburg," said the man; "you seem as if you rather liked it than otherwise."

"Oh, no," answered Ferdinand, laughing; "I don't like it; but, as I expected it from the very first, I am not taken by surprise. There would be no benefit either, my good friend, in my struggling with you after struggling is useless, or in railing at you when railing would have no effect, and, therefore, all I have to say on the subject is, that there can be little good in keeping me here, since some of the men have got off, for I saw them with my own eyes. They will carry the news just as well as I could, and before this time to-morrow you will have the two Counts under Eppenfeld."

"That's all very good," answered Fritz; "but I shall keep you here, notwithstanding."

"I hope not on account of the blow I gave you," said Ferdinand; "no good soldier ever resents a fair blow received in strife."

"No, no," replied the other; "if you knocked me down, I tripped you up, so that's all equal; but I have two good reasons for keeping you:--first, my good lord having more wine than wit in his head, I am thinking, sent messages to the two Counts which could do no good, and might do much harm; and secondly, you'll be a sort of hostage, young man. I know the Count loves you well, and would not like to see you dangling from the battlements, like a pear from the end of a branch."

"He would not much care, I fancy," answered Ferdinand, indifferently. "But in the mean time, I should like to have some supper, for if a man is to be hanged to-morrow, that is no reason why he should not eat and drink to-day."

"Well, supper you shall have, and good wine to boot," answered Fritz. "You seem to bear a light heart, and ought not to want wherewithal to keep it up.--It is lucky that hanging is soon over, and can't happen twice, so good night and God speed ye!"

With this peculiar topic of consolation the man left him to comfort himself as best he might, and closing the door behind him, swung up a ponderous wooden bar, and pushed the bolts into the staples.

CHAPTER XVI.

The day had been bright and cheerful, but towards nightfall the sky had become obscured by thin, light vapours. Low, sweeping clouds, or rather masses of drifting mist, were hurried along through the air, and brushing the hills, and sometimes floating down into the valleys--like the skirt of the wind's gray robe--now hid the grander features of the scene, now suffered the crags

and pinnacles to peep out clear and distinct, as on they hastened with all the speed and importance of great affairs. As the sun set, indeed, a purple glow diffused itself amongst those vapours, but they did not clear away; and speedily after a fine rain began to fall, somewhat cold and chilly, hiding everything around in dull opaque mist. In fact, one of those frequent alternations to which all mountain countries are more or less subject, had come over the weather, rendering the evening as cheerless and dismal as the morning had been bright and gay.

Nevertheless, two horsemen still rode on their way about half-past eight o'clock, though their beasts were evidently jaded, and their own garments and arms were covered with the dust of many a weary mile of road; but about five or six miles beyond the small town of Anweiler, one of the horses cast a shoe, and the beast speedily began to show symptoms of lameness. The rider was consequently obliged to dismount, and lead his weary steed; and the other drew in his bridle, in order not to outride his companion--for the state of society, of which we have given some glimpses, rendered the presence of a companion on the road a very desirable circumstance to the wayfarer.

"We can't be far from the smith's forge," said the dismounted man to his friend. "I will stop and get him shod there."

"Will he shoe him?" asked the other. "He is no friend of our good lord, and has not shod a hoof for him for years."

"Oh, Franz Creussen is a good heart," answered the man on foot. "He would shoe the devil sooner than a poor beast should go lame. Besides, he will like to hear our tidings, though they will vex him mightily; for the young gentleman is a great friend of his. By the Lord! I should not wonder if that mad Baron of Eppenfeld put him to death--there's no knowing what he will do."

"No, no," answered the other; "he knows better. The Count would make him pay dearly for it."

"I'm not sure of that," replied the man on foot. "I've seen him give Ferdinand of Altenburg many a moody look at times; and I've a notion in my head--but no matter for that, I shall keep it to myself. I think some people in the castle love the young gentleman better than our lord likes."

"Not unlikely," said the man on horseback. "I've my thoughts too, but the less said the better."

The conversation now dropped between the two weary men, and for about half an hour or so they continued to plod on their way in silence, till at length a red glare, suddenly rising and falling through the dark and misty air, showed them that they were approaching the forge of Franz Creussen, and that the industrious smith, or some of his busy men, were still pursuing the labours of the day. The wide open shed, when they came near, displayed ten or twelve Cyclops, naked nearly to the waist, plying the busy hammer at different anvils, blowing the huge bellows, or heating the iron in the fire. But Franz Creussen himself was not amongst them; and while one of the travellers applied to have his horse shod as speedily as possible, the other inquired for the master of the forge, and was informed that he had gone into his cottage hard by, to take his evening meal. Fastening his horse by a hook, the horseman proceeded to seek Franz in his house; and as the smith was a wealthy man in his way of life, offering very cogent reasons for refusing to submit to many of the exactions which the neighbouring nobles generally laid upon the peasantry, his dwelling presented an appearance of comfort, and even luxury, seldom met with amongst persons in his station.

"Who the fiend are you?" exclaimed the giant, as soon as the soldier entered. "I have seen your face somewhere, but do not know your name. Ah! now I bethink me; you are one of those who were riding with the lad Ferdinand this morning, are you not? Where is he?--but I can guess."

"He's in a dungeon at Eppenfeld by this time," answered the man. "I and my companion are the only two that got off; so, as I know you have a friendship for him, Franz, I thought I would come in and tell you, while my comrade got his horse's shoe put on."

"That was kind, that was kind," cried Franz Creussen, rubbing one of his temples with a forefinger as big as a child's arm. "There, take some wine; the boy must be got out."

"Oh, the Count will get him out," answered the soldier; adding, "that's to say, if they don't put him to death first."

"If they do, let them have good heed to their brains," said Franz Creussen; "for the Baron of Eppenfeld's skull would make a poor anvil, and yet it shall be tapped by my hammer, if he has injured the lad in life or limb. It's time that the Baron were out of the world, as well as some others;" and Franz Creussen fell into thought, and rubbed his temple again.

The man, in the mean while, helped himself liberally to the wine which the smith offered, and in a minute or two after, the master of the forge raised himself suddenly, saying, "The horse must be shod by this time, and you must onto Ehrenstein with all speed, to bear these tidings to the lords there, for they must not let the youth lie long in Eppenfeld."

"Oh, the Count will see right done, and that quickly," answered his companion.

"If the one Count doesn't, the other will," replied Franz Creussen; "but you speed on, and let

them have the intelligence at all events;" and striding into his forge, he reproved his men somewhat sharply for having taken so long to put a shoe on a horse; and having seen the work accomplished, and bid the two soldiers adieu, he turned to his own workmen, saying, "Shut up, shut up, and put out the fires. I have other work in hand for us all."

In the mean while the two soldiers of Ehrenstein rode on their way homeward, forcing their horses to as quick a pace as fatigue would permit. When they reached the castle the hour was late, but the Count was still playing at tables with his guest, and they were instantly admitted to his presence. They found both the noblemen in a gay mood, laughing over their game; while Adelaide sat at a little distance on one side, with Martin of Dillberg standing by her chair, and the jester, seated on a stool, amusing her by his quaint remarks.

"Well, what tidings, what tidings?" exclaimed the Count of Ehrenstein. "Where is Ferdinand? Is he not come back?"

The man's answer, on the present occasion, was much the same as that which he had made to Franz Creussen; and when it was uttered, the Count of Ehrenstein struck the table vehemently, exclaiming, "This is too bad. By Heaven it shall be avenged!"

Count Frederick's eye glanced suddenly to the countenance of the fair girl who sat near, which had become deadly pale; and then, turning to the soldier, he inquired, "Did you hear the young gentleman deliver his message?"

"No, my good lord," replied the man who had before spoken, "I was left with the horses, but Herman here did."

"What said the Baron?" asked Count Frederick, turning to the other, who was now coming forward. "Tell us all that took place."

Herman, however, was a slower and more cautious man than his companion, and he was by no means inclined to repeat expressions which he had heard distinctly enough, but which he feared might give offence to the two noblemen before whom he stood, judging rightly, that a part of the anger excited by insulting messages always attaches to the person who bears them. He replied, therefore, circumspectly, "The Baron seemed to be in a great fury, noble Sir; and indeed, I thought had been drinking too much. I can't recollect all that he said, but I know he sent Ferdinand of Altenburg back with a flat refusal. Then the young gentleman defied him boldly in both your names, and warned him that you would be under his hold before four-and-twenty hours were over. That seemed to enrage him still more, and thinking we might not get off quite safely, I mounted my horse as soon as we were in the court. Master Ferdinand had his foot in the stirrup to do so likewise, when they came running out of the hall, and laid hold of him. He struck the first man down, but there were so many that it was impossible to contend with them; and seeing the greater number of our people taken, and our leader held down by three men with their knives at his throat, I thought it best to gallop off while the drawbridge was down, that you might know what had happened as soon as possible."

Count Frederick looked again towards Adelaide, and then to her father, saying, "This must be avenged, indeed, Ehrenstein. Both for our honour's sake, and for this noble youth's deliverance, we must take speedy steps."

"I will march at daybreak," answered the Count of Ehrenstein; "and with your good aid, doubt not to bring this freebooter to reason very speedily."

"By my faith! I will march to-night," cried Count Frederick. "Daybreak, I trust, will find me beneath his walls. Frederick of Leiningen sleeps not after he is insulted, till he has had vengeance. If it will take you long time to prepare, you can follow to-morrow;--for my part, I will give this man no time to strengthen himself against us. Martin, hie ye down, and bid the men feed their horses, make ready their arms, and take with them sufficient for a three days' stay in the field. I will not lodge under aught but the blue sky or the green bough, till I have righted this wrong."

"I will with you, noble friend," said the Count of Ehrenstein. "In two or three hours I can be ready. Ho! Seckendorf, Mosbach! to the saddle, good knights, leave your draughts and prepare for Eppenfeld."

"You must leave men enough to guard your castle, Ehrenstein," said Count Frederick, "and some one to command in it."

"I will command, uncle," said the jester, coming forward, "that's my place by right of birth."

Count Frederick smiled, but paused a moment, and then asked "How do you prove that, Herr von Narren?"

"Why, I am the eldest son of the family," answered the jester, "the eldest branch of the whole house."

"Indeed," cried the Lord of Ehrenstein, "show us your quarterings, mein Herr, with which of my ancestors does your tribe begin?"

"With Adam," answered the jester.

"But the eldest branch, the eldest branch--how are you of the eldest branch?" asked Count Frederick, "by the father's or the mother's side?"

"By the male," said the jester. "Was not Adam a fool when he ate the apple, because his wife asked him? Was not Cain a fool when he killed Abel, and thought that nobody saw him? So you see we of the cloth are evidently of the elder branch, and take the inheritance, and therefore I've a right to command in the castle."

"Nay, nay, Herr von Narren," said the Lord of Ehrenstein. "I must leave one of my own men to command under you."

"Cannot I fill that task, noble Count?" asked Martin of Dillberg, who had just returned to the hall. "If I remain behind, I shall be right glad to be of any service."

"If you remain behind!" exclaimed Count Frederick; "why should you do so, Martin? You are not one to shirk honour, or to fly from danger, I hope--why should you not go with the rest?"

"I do not know, my lord," replied the young man, with a heavy look; "only when my horse fell with me near Saarbrück, you said I was not to take the field again for some time, and left me behind to follow slowly."

"But you were well enough to overtake us ere we reached Ehrenstein," rejoined his lord.

"I am quite ready, noble Sir," answered Martin of Dillberg, in dull tone, "and only feared you might not let me go, remembering that you halted two days on the road, so that I had time to journey leisurely--but I am quite well enough to go, and Heaven knows I do not wish to stay away when anything like glory is to be gained."

Count Frederick made no answer at the time, but seemed to muse over what had passed. Shortly after the whole party separated to prepare, and by two in the morning all the followers of the two Counts, except a small band left to guard the castle, were assembled in the court. The jester himself was ready, harnessed like a man at arms; but at the last moment, Count Frederick turned to Martin of Dillberg, and told him he was to remain. The young man affected to remonstrate, but the Count repeated his commands in a grave and not very well pleased tone; and then turning to the jester with a laugh, he added, "You had better stay too, Herr von Narren, though I know in general you are wise enough to go where hard blows are to be got rather than stay within stone walls."

"Variety, uncle, variety," said the jester. "I have had enough of stone walls for a time, and do not see why I should not change the inside for the out. Besides, Martin of Dillberg's company is too great a luxury to be indulged in often--it would make one effeminate."

The young man gave him a bitter look as he mounted his horse, and shortly after, with several lighted torches before them, to show them their way down the steep descent, the whole party set out upon their expedition, leaving Martin of Dillberg behind them, and the castle soon after relapsed into silence and tranquillity.

CHAPTER XVII.

Ferdinand of Altenburg seated himself upon the edge of the pallet, and gave way to thought; nor must it be denied that after the first excitement of action was over, he felt his position to be one of no inconsiderable pain, difficulty, and danger. Imprisonment, forced solitude, and the deprivation of active exertion, must ever be a heavy burden for eager and busy youth to bear, even for an hour; but there were many other evils, possible, probable, and actual, which the young gentleman had to contemplate as he sat there and meditated over his fate. To be deprived of the society of her he loved, for many hours, perhaps for many days--to leave all the circumstances, by which his fate and hers might be affected for ever, to be decided by accident to know that one for whom he felt an instinctive jealousy and dislike was to be possessed, during his absence, of the blessing of her society, of the treasure which he valued beyond all price and would have guarded for himself with a miser's care, were first among the painful impressions that presented themselves. But then came the questions of how his imprisonment might terminate; how long it might continue; what might be the end. Amongst the rude and ruthless acts of those times there were innumerable instances of such threats as those which had been held out by the man who had just left him, being carried into execution. There was something more than a possibility, there was a probability of his being treated as a hostage to ensure the

forbearance of the Count of Ehrenstein and his guest; and, moreover, if his situation failed in deterring them from seeking retribution for the offences of the Baron of Eppenfeld, there was every likelihood of that daring and rapacious nobleman, adding to crimes from the consequences of which he could not escape by putting his prisoner to death. Ferdinand had then to consider, what chance there existed of the two Counts either refraining, out of regard for his safety, from active measures against the Baron, or of their temporising with their enemy till his security was obtained. In regard to Count Frederick, he had indeed some hope, for there was a frank and upright bearing about that prince which had impressed him at once with a belief that he would act in all circumstances in a generous as well as an honourable manner; but when he thought of the Count of Ehrenstein he could flatter himself with no hope of any pause or consideration in his favour, when in the opposite scale was to be placed the recovery of a large sum of gold. Perhaps he did him injustice, but he was inclined to believe that the person must be much more dear to the Count than he was, whose life would not be risked or sacrificed for a certain amount of ducats. His only hope was, that Count Frederick's presence might have some effect in mitigating his own lord's eagerness. But in matters of life and death such slight chances of escape afford but small consolation, and Ferdinand's mood was certainly somewhat gloomy when the Baron of Eppenfeld's chief officer returned with a man bearing some wine and meat.

The young gentleman banished everything like care from his look, however, as soon as he heard the bolts withdrawn; and he received the provisions with a gay air, saying, "Thanks, thanks, good Sir, I hope the wine is good; for this place is not lively, and I shall have nought to while away the hours but wine or sleep, and the bed does not seem a soft one."

"You may have a harder to-morrow," was Fritz's only reply; and withdrawing as soon as the provisions were set down, he left Ferdinand once more to, his own thoughts.

For some time the captive touched neither meat nor drink; leaning his head upon his hand, and still meditating more and more sadly. At length, however, he started up, saying, "Well, it is no use thinking, I must have some food, whatever be the result;" and after eating sparingly, he set the flagon to his lips and took a deep draught. The wine was good, and it cheered him, but he did not repeat the libation; and walking to and fro in his cell, he continued his meditations; now smiling and now frowning, as fancy sometimes brightened and sometimes darkened the prospect of the fate before him. While thus occupied, the small loophole window of the cell showed him the grey change in the colouring of the air, which precedes the coming on of night, and he could hear the evening noise of the storks, as they prepared to wing their way up from the stream that ran through the valley below, towards the pinnacles of the castle. Soon after the growing twilight nearly deprived him of all sight in his dull abode; and in a few minutes more all was darkness.

"Well, I will lay me down, and try to sleep," said Ferdinand; and though the drowsy god refused to come at first, yet after a while his eyes grew heavy, and he fell asleep. His slumbers were disturbed, however, by the same sad and gloomy images which had haunted his waking thoughts, and ere two hours were over, he woke again with a start, and vague apprehensions of he knew not what. For several moments he could not recollect where he was; but when he had collected his thoughts, and found that the attempt to sleep any more would be in vain, he rose, and walking to the little loophole, gazed out upon the narrow space of sky that it offered to his sight.

The valley below seemed to be filled with clouds of mist; but the height upon which the castle stood raised it above the vapours, and he could see two bright stars--one twinkling, clear, and immovable, high up in the sky, and the other with a softer and more gentle fire, which appeared to move slowly across the lower part of the aperture. Ferdinand's quick imagination speedily found images of human fate and circumstances in what he saw.

"There shines honour and truth above," he said; "steadfast to the end; and there moves love and hope along the course of earthly life, pure and bright, even if less sparkling than the higher light."

He stood and gazed for nearly half an hour, for there was something attractive in those stars which kept him fixed to the spot. It seemed in his solitude as if there was a companionship in their rays--as if they shone to soothe and cheer him; and he was still suffering his fancy to sport free amongst the fields of space, when he heard a step approaching, as if some one were about to pass before the loophole; a moment or two after, before it reached the spot where he stood, there was a pause, and then a voice said, "Where is the postern? It used to be somewhere here. Hundert Schwestern! they cannot have blocked it up."

"Whose voice is that?" said Ferdinand, in a low tone. There was an instant pause, and all was again silent, till Ferdinand repeated his question, saying, "Who is there? I should know the voice.--Is it you, Franz?"

"Hush!" said the speaker without, and the next instant the lower part of the loophole was darkened by what seemed the head of a man.

"Is that you in there, Master Ferdinand?" said the voice of the smith. "Answer quietly, for we may be overheard from above."

"It is even I, Franz," answered the young gentleman. "But I fear you are bringing yourself into

great peril; and on my account too, if I am not mistaken."

"Never mind that," answered the smith. "I have plenty to help me in case of need. But can you tell me where the postern is, lad? I will soon get in if I can but find it."

"I know not where it is," answered Ferdinand; "but I saw traces of the passage going on beyond this door. However, when you are in I do not see how you will be able to reach me."

"Easy enough, easy enough," answered Franz Creussen. "I know the place of old, and I have not heard that the Baron has laid out much money in altering his castle since he had it. Besides, I will number the loop-holes as I go, and then we shall be sure to get you out."

"Thanks Franz, a thousand thanks," answered the young gentleman. "Were I to stay till to-morrow, I find I should most probably make my exit by a window and a rope."

"Well, keep quiet, and be ready," answered Franz Creussen. "Come along my man, and have the horn ready for a blast. I will keep the door against any ten of them, when once we've got it open, till the men from below can come up." Thus saying, he walked on; but Ferdinand could hear his steps for only six or seven paces farther, and then the worthy smith seemed to stop, and a dull sound was heard, as of some one sawing slowly through a thick and heavy piece of timber. Ferdinand remembered that as he had been carried, or rather pushed along the passage from which the cell entered, he had seen a low door at the end, which might well be a postern leading out upon the rock. But he feared that the sound which caught his ear might rouse some of the other tenants of the castle; or attract the notice of some watchful sentinels upon the walls. The predatory habits of the Baron of Eppenfeld, however, and the frequent feuds which they entailed with his neighbours, had not taught him that caution which was a part of the natural disposition of the Count of Ehrenstein; and trusting to the renown of a name which had become terrible, and the natural strength of his hold, he maintained a very different watch from that which his captive had been accustomed to see practised. His soldiery, too, imitating the habits of their leader, were by no means exempt from his vices; and an alternation of cunning schemes, fierce enterprises, and reckless revelry, formed the life of the inhabitants of Eppenfeld. A number of the men had been sent out the night before upon different errands affecting the peculiar circumstances in which the Baron was placed. The rest had finished their carouse as soon as the capture of Ferdinand and his companions was effected; and a solitary watchman, placed on a high tower, solaced his loneliness by a long and comfortable nap, with his back resting against the battlements.

Thus no ear but Ferdinand's heard the sound, which ceased much sooner than he expected, and drawing near to the door, he listened eagerly, till at length he heard the creaking of rusty hinges, and then a step in the passage. The next instant he distinguished the drawing of bolts, but it was not the door of his own cell which they had unfastened, and he then knocked gently with his hand, to indicate the place of his confinement. The step then came on, the heavy wooden bar was removed, the other fastenings undone, and his eye, accustomed to the darkness, could make out the tall figure of the smith, as he bent down to look in.

"Are you there, lad?" said Franz Creussen. "Ay, I see you now; come along, come along; have you any arms?"

"My sword they have got, and my head-piece," answered Ferdinand; "the rest they left me. Let us away, Franz. I can get arms hereafter; yet I would fain, were it possible, free the poor fellows who were with me."

"Oh! they will be safe enough," answered Franz Creussen; "you were the only one in danger. We must lose no time, for we have got far to go, and may have much to do.--But we'll leave the doors open behind us, that the Counts may get in; for I dare say these swine will not find it out till they have the spears of Ehrenstein under their walls."

Thus saying, he hurried away down the passage to the postern door, where one of his stout workmen was standing; and somewhat to his surprise, Ferdinand now found that both master and man were completely armed.

"Why, Franz," he said, in a low voice; "you look like a knight."

"Ay," answered Franz Creussen, merrily; "they always told me I look worse than I am. But come along, come along, and mind your footing, for on my life there are some spots where it is not safe to pass."

Slowly wending their way along upon the narrow ledge of rock immediately under the walls of the castle on that side, with the deep valley wrapped in mists and shadows beneath them, and the blue sky with its thousand bright eyes twinkling up above, they came at the end of about a hundred yards, to a narrow footway down the front of the rock, not much less dangerous than the beetling summit which they had just quitted. In the bottom of the valley, about a mile from Eppenfeld, they found a large party of men and horses waiting for them, with a led horse over and above the number of the smith's companions, showing clearly that he had little doubted, from the first, that he should be able to set his young friend free. Few words were spoken, but mounting quickly, they took their way towards Anweiler, and ere long left that small place behind them.

"Now we are safe enough," said Franz Creussen; "for though the beast of Eppenfeld may perhaps pursue you farther, if he should find that you are gone, he will go straight towards Ehrenstein, and we must take another path. We may as well separate, however, and send some of the men on the direct road, then their horses' feet will mislead him."

This plan was accordingly followed, and the smith and his young companion, with five or six more of the party, took their way down towards the valley of the Rhine, and then made a circuit to the left, in the direction of Dürkheim, while the rest followed the straight road over the hills.

Little was said, either by Franz Creussen or Ferdinand, as they rode at the head of the troop; but at length, at the crossing of the road, the smith suddenly drew in his rein, saying, "I forgot to tell the men, if they met with the Counts and their party, to say that they would find the postern door open. Ride off after them, Peterkin, as fast as you can; straight up that road to the left there.--You may as well take all the other men with you, for we sha'n't need them here. The Baron won't dare to come down into this open country.--But let some one give Master Ferdinand a lance, or at worst a sword; though I think a sword is the best of the two after all."

"The Counts won't set out till they hear or see something of me," said Ferdinand; "or at all events not before to-morrow."

"I don't know that," answered Franz Creussen. "Your lord might not, but he has got a better man with him; and as to their hearing, they've heard long ago,--get ye gone, Peterkin, and take the men, as I told you."

These orders were obeyed as promptly as if he had been a military commander; and the smith and his young companion rode on at a slow pace for about half a mile.

At length Ferdinand remarked, "I think we could get forward quicker, Franz; the horses don't seem tired."

"Ay, but I want to talk to you a bit, Master Ferdinand; I've long wished it, and now I've got the opportunity.--But look there,--lights moving along the hills. The two Counts, take my word for it. But never you mind, come on towards Ehrenstein. You may do as much good there as where they are going."

"I think so too, Franz," answered Ferdinand; "and I am anxious to get there fast; for Father George wishes to see me to-night, and it must be now near two."

"Ah! that alters the case," answered Franz Creussen. "We'll spur on then.--Two, why it's past three by this time;" and striking his horse with his spur, he trotted quickly along the road.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The travellers paused not till they had to turn their horses up the side of the hills; but then the beasts slackened their pace without the riders drawing the rein, for the ascent was steep, and the roads not so good as they are now. A wide wood covered the slopes; and the path wound in and out amongst the trees, while glimpses of the rising moon were seen through the brakes, where the leafy screen fell away; and often a straggling ray of moonlight was caught pouring over the bushes, even where the bright orb of night was invisible to the eye of the wanderer.

"I know not how to offer you my thanks, Franz," said Ferdinand of Altenburg, as he laid down the bridle on the beast's neck. "I know you would have no wordy gratitude; and I must not hope that you will ever be in circumstances which may enable me to return you the kindness you have shown me. Nevertheless I hope some occasion may come when I can prove to you how deeply I feel it."

"God send that Franz Creussen may ever want help as little as he needs it now," answered the stout smith; "and God send he may ever be as able and as willing to lend it to those who deserve it, Master Ferdinand. I know not which would be the greatest curse, to be unwilling though able, or to be willing and yet unable, to aid a good fellow-creature in his need. The first, methinks; for though in the latter case one might feel much pain, in the former one would have no pleasure. But it is not gratitude or service in return, one works for. One hammers iron for pay; but one does not do what is kind for recompense of any sort. On the contrary, I think one takes a greater pleasure in serving a person who can never repay it, especially when one has served him before. Now I have had a kindness for you from your boyhood. Do you remember when you used to come to me from the Abbey to give you fishing lines to catch the poor shining fellows out of the stream--the White fish and the May fish? A little curly-headed urchin you were then, as wild as a young

roe deer, but not half so timid."

"I remember it well, Franz," replied Ferdinand, "those were happy days, and I shall never forget them. You were always very kind to me, and I believe used to spoil me, and do everything I asked you."

"Not a whit, not a whit," cried the smith. "I pitched you into the river once when you were over wilful, just to cool your fire; and then I pulled you out again, and laughed at you, which did you more good than the wetting.--But that was a long time ago--you were just six years old then."

"I recollect it well," answered the young gentleman, "and it served me right. I have never failed to think of it when I have felt inclined to give way to angry impatience. It was just by the mill pond."

"Ay, your memory is good," said the smith, "can you remember anything before that?"

"Oh, yes," replied Ferdinand, after a moment's thought; "I can recollect many things that happened at the Abbey. I can remember, when the Abbot Waldimer died, the great bell tolling, and how hard it was for Father George to teach me to read and write."

"Ay, but before that?" asked Franz Creussen. "Can you recall any other place, before you were at the Abbey?"

"Sometimes I think I do," was the young gentleman's reply. "You know, Franz, when one is riding along in the night, everything will seem dark and indistinct around one, with trees, and rocks, and houses, all faint, and scarcely to be distinguished one from the other, taking strange shapes and unnatural forms; and then, if one passes the open door of a cottage where there is a light burning, or a forge like yours, one suddenly sees a small space around, all clear and defined; and then the minute after everything is dark again. Now the past seems to me just like that. I see, when I turn my eyes to the days of my childhood, a number of strange vague things, of which I can make out the forms but faintly, and know not what they are; but here and there comes a spot of brightness, where all seems as if it were now before my eyes."

"Ay, that is curious," said the smith. "Can you tell me any of these matters that you recollect so clearly?"

Ferdinand paused a moment, and then answered, "I am sure I can trust you, Franz; but Father George warned me to tell no one at the castle anything I may be able to remember of my early days."

"I am not of the castle," answered Franz Creussen; "and besides, if I chose, I could tell you more of those days than you yourself could tell me."

"Indeed," answered Ferdinand; "I remember you, it is true, ever since my boyhood, but still, I do not see your figure in any of those visions which sometimes come back upon me."

"Ay, but I've held you in my arms when you were not a twelvemonth old," said his companion, "and carried you at my saddle-bow during six hours of a long night. It is true I did not see you for years after, till Franz Creussen became the Abbey smith, and you the ward of Father George. But tell me what you recollect, lad, for you may tell me safely. I can keep counsel, as you may see; but things are now coming to a close, and it is right we should all understand each other."

"The first thing I can recollect," said the young gentleman, "seems to me a fine house in a small town, with gardens and trees, and a beautiful lady I called mother,--that is a pleasant dream, Franz, full of happy things, sports of childhood, joys in flowers, and in birds' songs,--I am sure I remember it well, for nobody has talked to me about those things since, and it cannot be all fancy."

"No, no," answered Franz Creussen; "it is all true, quite true, and the lady was your mother! What more?"

"The next thing I remember," continued the young man; "is a less happy day. It seems as if I had been playing at my mother's knee in that same house--it was not a castle, but like the dwelling of some rich burgher,--and then suddenly came in a messenger, with what seemed evil tidings; for the lady wept, and in a few minutes all was bustle and confusion, packing up clothes and other things in haste; and then people spurring away at fiery speed, till I was weary, and fell asleep."

"Ay, ay, who carried you, then?" said the smith; "who but Franz Creussen? What do you recollect next?"

"There must have been a long interval," replied Ferdinand; "for I was a bigger boy then; and of the intervening time I re-member little or nothing; but shortly after that it seems as if I was very lonely and sad, and seldom saw my mother, till one night I was called into a room where she lay upon a bed propped up with pillows, and there were priests in the room, and men in black gowns, and the girl called Caroline, who used to nurse me; but my mother's face was sadly changed then,--it was thin and sharp, and pale, and the lips seemed bloodless, but her eyes were

exceedingly bright, and her teeth as white as driven snow. She had a crucifix lying before her,--I recollect it well--a black cross with an ivory figure on it,--and she put her arms round my neck, and kissed me often, and prayed God to bless me, and make me happier and more fortunate than my father and herself.--That was not long before I went to the Abbey, I think; but I never saw her after."

Franz Creussen was silent for a moment or two, apparently from some emotion of the mind, but at length he answered, in a low tone, "She died that night, Ferdinand. You remember more than I thought, and I doubt not a few words would make you remember much more still. But here we are upon the top of the hill, and if Father George requires you to-night, it will be well for you to ride on quickly, for the day will be dawning ere long."

"I had better go to the castle first," replied Ferdinand; "for if the Count be not on his way to Eppenfeld, he may blame me for delay."

"No need, no need," answered the smith; "he is on the way, I am sure; but we shall find some of the men at the forge, who will tell us. There lies the village, not a hundred yards in advance."

The tidings they received at the blacksmith's dwelling showed, as he had expected, that the Count of Ehrenstein had passed nearly an hour before, and that, having met, farther on, and questioned some of the party to whom Ferdinand owed his deliverance, he had sent back a message by them, commanding his young follower not to join him at Eppenfeld, but to remain at the Castle of Ehrenstein till his return.

Bidding adieu to the smith, with hearty thanks, Ferdinand spurred on alone, but paused for a moment at the chapel in the wood, and knocked at the door of the good priest. At first no answer was returned, but a second summons soon roused Father George from his slumbers, and brought him to the door.

The grey dawn was now beginning to break, and as soon as the priest beheld the face of his young ward, he exclaimed, "Not to-night, Ferdinand, not to-night.--Night do I call it? Heaven help us! it is morning. See you not the sun coming up there? To-morrow night, my boy, as soon as all in the castle are asleep, come down, and bring the lady with you. I pray this Baron of Eppenfeld may keep the Counts before his tower for a day or two."

"I doubt that such will be the case, good Father," answered Ferdinand, "for there is a postern open, and they have tidings of it."

"That is unlucky," said the priest, "but speed you on to the castle, and hide well your purpose from every eye. Let no one see you thoughtful or agitated, and go early to rest, as if you were tired with the labours of the days past. Away, Ferdinand, away."

The young man waved his hand and rode on, and in a few minutes his horse was in front of the great gates. Beckoning to one of the sentinels on the walls, he told him to go down and wake the warder to let him in. But the man came down himself, and unbarred the gates, while Ferdinand, dismounting, led his horse across the draw-bridge.

"Ha! God's benison on you, Master Ferdinand!" said the soldier. "You have luck to get out of the castle of Eppenfeld. How did you manage that?"

"I will tell you all another time, Henry," replied the young gentleman. "I am tired now, and hungry, to say sooth. Who is in the castle?"

"Why, the Count went forth some time ago," replied the man, "and left nought but a guard of twenty men, with the women, and Count Frederick's priest, and him they call Martin of Dillberg."

Ferdinand muttered something to himself which the soldier did not hear, and then led on his horse towards the stable. None of the grooms were up; but every young gentleman in those days was well accustomed to tend his own horse, and, though it must be confessed, the escaped captive did what was necessary for his poor charger as rapidly as possible, yet he did not neglect him. As soon as this duty was accomplished, he hurried back into the castle; and had any one been watching him, it might have been observed that his step became more light and noiseless as he ascended the great stairs, and passed along the corridor, which stretched across one entire side of the principal mass of the building. At the door next but one to that of the Count of Ehrenstein, he paused for several moments, and looked up with an anxious and hesitating look, as if he doubted whether he should go in. But the morning light was by this time shining clear through the casements; he heard the sound of persons moving below, and for Adelaide's sake he forbore, and walked on towards the narrow staircase which led to his own chamber. Ere he had taken ten steps, however, a sound, as slight as the whisper of the summer wind, caused him to stop and turn his head; and he saw the face of Bertha looking out from her mistress's apartments. Instantly going back as noiselessly as possible, he whispered, "Is your lady waking? Can I come in?"

"Not unless you are mad," answered Bertha. "She has been up all night, and I too, God wot--though I have slept comfortably in the corner. But thank Heaven you are safe and well, for her little foolish heart would break easy enough if anything were to happen to your unworthiness. But what news? When did you return?"

"I am but this instant back," answered the lover, "I have been captive at Eppenfeld, and only freed by good Franz Creussen. Tell her that I have seen Father George, however, and that he says--mark well, Bertha--to-morrow night, as soon as all is quiet in the castle. She will soon understand."

"Oh, I understand, too," answered Bertha, "for I have seen Father George as well as you--forced to go down to do your errands. Well, poor souls, as there is no other to help you, I must. But now tell me how is all this to be arranged?"

"I will come, I will come," replied Ferdinand, "as soon as every one is asleep."

"Well, on my word, you gain courage quickly," exclaimed Bertha. "You will come! What, here?"

"Ay, anywhere," rejoined Ferdinand; "if it cost me life, pretty Bertha, I would come--but hark, there are people stirring above--Tell your lady--adieu."

"Be cautious, be cautious, rash young man," said the girl, and instantly drawing back, closed the door.

On the stairs Ferdinand encountered Martin of Dillberg, who would fain have stopped him to speak of his adventures; but the former passed on, after a brief answer to the youth's inquiry regarding his escape; and Martin of Dillberg proceeded on his way, with his lip curling for a moment in a sneering smile, which faded away quickly, and gave place to a look of deep and anxious thought.

Ferdinand sought no great length of repose; but was speedily down again in the halls of the castle, on the battlements, in the corridors, in the hope of somewhere meeting her he loved. Nor was he disappointed; for some hours before noon, Adelaide came forth, with hopes and wishes like his own, to walk upon the walls.--But hardly had she and Ferdinand met--not ten words had been spoken between them--when Martin of Dillberg was at the lady's side; and thus during the whole day were they deprived of all means of direct communication. As if he divined their object, and was resolved to frustrate it, the youth was always on the watch, ever near, never abashed, although the effect of his presence on their conversation was only too visible. Thus passed by hour after hour, till towards evening, tidings arrived that the two Counts were still beneath the walls of Eppenfeld, and that but little progress had been made in the siege. Ferdinand questioned the messenger as to whether the postern by which he had escaped had been attempted; but upon that point the man could give him no information; and the young gentleman thought it his duty to send the soldier back to his lord with intelligence in case the news which had been formerly sent had been misunderstood or not received--and with a request that he might be permitted to join the attacking force on the following day.

For one brief moment, soon after the messenger had departed, Adelaide and her lover were alone together; and ere their tormentor was upon them again, she had time to say, "Bertha has told me all, dear Ferdinand, I shall be ready."

Not long after, she retired to her own apartments for the night; and her lover remained in the hall with Martin of Dillberg and Count Frederick's chaplain, trying to weary them out, till nearly eleven o'clock at night. Then declaring that he was tired with all that he had done during the preceding day,--which was true enough,--he withdrew to his own chamber, and there sat meditating over the happiness of the coming hour. The moments seemed sadly long; it appeared as if the sounds of voices speaking and closing doors would never end; but at length the noises ceased, one after the other; and after waiting half an hour without hearing anything stir within the walls, with a beating but happy heart, Ferdinand approached his door, opened it, and listened.

CHAPTER XIX.

The whole castle of Eppenfeld slept as tranquilly for several hours after Ferdinand of Altenburg had left it, as if no danger had threatened its lord, and no troops were marching to attack it; and it is very probable that the evasion of the young captive, and the means of entrance which he had left open for the enemy, would not have been discovered till chance or humanity led some one in the place to send him food, had it not been for an accidental event which happened during the night. We have seen that one of the motives for preventing the young gentleman's return to his lord, was to afford time for storing the castle with provisions; and various parties had been sent out to scour the country for that purpose. Some of the leaders went nearly drunk, and returned sober, and some went sober and returned nearly drunk. Amongst the latter was a personage who, accompanied by two companions, found his way to a village where they enjoyed

themselves for a couple of hours; and then, finding it late, and no progress made in their foray, they rode on to the side of a hill, where the villagers were accustomed to feed their swine, and possessing themselves of the unruly beasts, commenced the far more difficult enterprise of driving them to the castle. Now the distance could scarcely be less than ten miles; and if any one considers what it is for three men, not very sober, to drive sixty swine such a distance, he will not be surprised that the task occupied many hours. Nevertheless, on approaching the castle, which they did by the lesser entrance at the back, the marauders found their flock shorn of its fair proportions, and not more than forty of the beasts which never chew the cud could be mustered, notwithstanding all the counting which the three soldiers could accomplish. One of the hogs had run one way, another another. One had committed suicide by throwing itself into a stream, rather than follow the course on which fate and circumstances were driving it; another had been run through the body by one of the soldiers, somewhat too eager in pursuit; others had rushed back between the horses, and had effected their escape; while others again lay down upon the road, and refused to move even when the lance galled their sturdy chines.

Within a mile of Eppenfeld, however, the leader fancied that he had got the remainder of the herd in security, for the road was narrow, and led straight up to the lesser gate of the castle. Unfortunately, however, the small foot-path communicating with the postern, branched off on the right hand of the road about a hundred yards' distance from the walls. Though it was night, and the whole party, horse and foot, was tired, a brisk young porker, who seemed to set fatigue at defiance, instantly perceived the way to the postern, and as it was evidently a path which his drivers did not wish to pursue, he darted towards it, with a sort of caracole, and a grunt of intimation to his companions. The hint was not lost upon them, and with one universal whine of delight, the whole herd were instantly running along the path, and thence pursuing their way by the narrow ledge of rock under the wall of the castle.

To follow on horseback was out of the question, but two of the men instantly sprang to the ground, with a multitude of curious and high-sounding German oaths, and rushed after the bristly fugitives. Even then the open postern might have escaped observation, had not pigs been fond of strange places; but exactly at the spot where the small door stood open, a halt took place amongst the herd, and a tremendous pressure from behind was the consequence. Five or six were pitched over the edge of the rock, fracturing their skulls as they fell, and the rest, finding that hesitation was destruction, parted into two bodies, the one pursuing its way straightforward towards the opposite road through the valley, the others rushing, jostling, and squeaking, into the castle, as if it had been a great sty, for which, indeed, they might very well mistake it.

The pursuit of the first troop was evidently useless, and the two men, turning after the second division, proceeded to close the door to secure their prey, and then, for the first time, perceived that a large portion of woodwork, between the iron bands which secured the door, had been sawn away. To have found the postern open would have been nothing very marvellous in their eyes, considering the state of discipline in which they lived; but the work of the saw was convincing proof to them that somebody had been sawing; and driving the pigs before them into the courtyard, they at once proceeded to inquire who the sawyer was.

The whole castle was speedily roused and in an uproar; and what between the capture of the pigs, as they galloped about the wide court-yard, the instant putting of them to death, in not the most scientific manner, for want of food to keep them in a living and unsalted state, and the various operations for rendering the postern even more defensible than before, the active labours of the whole garrison were not over when daylight broke upon the castle, and the spears and pennons of the forces of Ehrenstein and Leiningen were seen coming up the valley.

The Baron laughed loud and long, as he watched the approach of the enemy. "Not a hundred and fifty men," he exclaimed; "on my life! I have a great mind to go out and meet them; why we have eighty here within the walls, and methinks the reiters of Eppenfeld are at least worth double those of Ehrenstein--but we will let them waste themselves upon the postern, for doubtless that young coistrel will direct them thither."

"I rather think they will strive to take us by famine, my valiant lord," replied Fritz, who was standing by him; "for depend upon it they have made such speed in order to prevent us from providing against a siege."

"Then we will give the lie to their expectations," cried the Baron of Eppenfeld. "Ho! bring us some good stout beams here. We will hang out a new sort of banner, such as they have never seen. Plant one firmly in every tower, and then bring up the carcasses of the pigs and oxen."

Under his directions the slaughtered cattle were pulled up aloft, and hung out from the battlements, like the banners of those days; and for some minutes the approaching force could not make out the meaning of this strange display.

"By Heaven! I believe he has hanged the poor fellows who went with our young friend Ferdinand," exclaimed Count Frederick, as the pigs, being the lightest, were first swung up to the top of the beams.

"Nay, nay, my good lord," cried Seckendorf, "they seem to me like swine. Ay, and there goes an ox, too, depend upon it he intends to allow us that he can hold out for a month or two."

"Let us to the postern with all speed," said old Karl of Mosbach; "he may find us in the donjon ere dinner time to help him eat his pork."

"Let it be well reconnoitred first," said the Count of Ehrenstein; "there is no use of our throwing away men's lives upon a useless attempt. It is evident that he is prepared to receive us. He has probably divined that we would come so soon, from the discovery of the lad's escape; and if so, depend upon it, the postern has been strengthened."

A party was accordingly detached to examine carefully the approach to the proposed point of attack, and advanced some way up the path leading from the valley. The walls of the castle were fully manned; and hand guns not having been yet invented, bows and crossbows were bent against the enemy: but not an arrow was discharged or a quarrel let fly, till the men of Ehrenstein having advanced considerably within range, discovered that the postern was blocked up in such a manner as would render any attack upon it hopeless with so small a force. No sooner did they commence their retreat, however, than a flight of missiles assailed them from the walls, greatly hastening their speed, and wounding several.

"Ah, ha!" cried the Baron, "they have had enough of the postern, and they will soon have had enough of the castle. It is too hard a stone for the teeth of these two poor Counts!"

But the worthy lord greatly miscalculated the character of one at least of his adversaries. The Count of Ehrenstein, indeed, would very willingly have accepted the liberation of his men as compensation for all offences; but the Baron did not even think fit to give the slightest sign of making that reparation; and Count Frederick was not a man to suffer any difficulties to divert him in his efforts to wipe out what he considered as both an insult and an injury. Shortly after the return of the reconnoitring party to their companions, various movements were observed amongst the assailants which somewhat puzzled the people on the walls, and discouraged the more wary and experienced. Three or four horsemen rode off in different directions at full speed; and the rest of the forces, dividing into two parties, posted themselves on the roads on either side of the castle, while the two Counts, with some ten or twelve picked men, took up their position under the shade of a large clump of beech trees, on the side of the hill opposite to the postern, whence both of the principal gates of Eppenfeld could be seen, and succour afforded to either of the bodies of assailants in case a sortie should be made from the walls. There dismounting from their horses, the two noblemen and their followers stretched themselves on the grass, and seemed calmly waiting for the result of the steps they had taken.

"Depend upon it, my good lord, they have sent to Neustadt for a party of those dogged citizens," said Fritz, "or perhaps to Landau for cannon."

"Nonsense and folly!" exclaimed the Baron, "they can never drag cannon up here. Why, the great pierrier of Landau weighs a couple of ton, and the little one a ton. They may bring a falconet, but that will do no good; and as to the pigs of Neustadt, we will slaughter them as they come, and send them home pickled to their fat wives."

Still it was evident that the worthy lord was by no means comfortable; and his uneasiness increased when he saw the men of Leiningen begin to cut down and shape some stout trees. He had so frequently beheld persons of power and courage, whom he had injured or offended, turn away, hopeless of redress, after a short demonstration against his stronghold, that he had calculated boldly upon such being the case in the present instance, and the signs of resolution and perseverance displayed by the two Counts, showed him plainly that the far more serious and discouraging affair of a siege was likely to follow. With dogged resolution, however, he held to resistance, and the only effect upon his mind was to make him take immediate measures for still further strengthening the defences of his castle. Great beams were placed across the gates, and the lower part of each was piled up with rubbish, which was very abundant within the building. The stones of the court-yard were taken up and carried to the battlements, to cast down upon the heads of any of the assailants who might venture to approach the walls; and several of the men, more dexterous than the rest, were set to provide stores of arrows and bolts, lest the provision already made should be exhausted. At the same time considerable quantities of wine were distributed amongst the men, to keep up their spirits; and as a warning to the rest, one of the soldiers, who ventured to hint that it might be better for the Baron to accommodate matters with the two Counts, had the lobes of his ears slit with a short dagger: his lord declaring that he was only fit to wear earrings.

Nevertheless, there was something in the calm immobility of the enemy, which created very unpleasant sensations in the bosom of the Baron of Eppenfeld. It was evident that they were waiting for farther assistance, and the perfect tranquillity of their aspect led him to believe that they felt confident that assistance would be complete and overpowering. Though not a very imaginative man, he tortured his fancy during the whole day, to divine whence and of what kind the expected succour would be. But about half an hour before nightfall, all doubts upon the subject were brought to an end, by the appearance, first, of a large body of pikemen on foot, in whom he instantly recognised, by their banners, the commons of several neighbouring towns, who had suffered by his spirit of appropriation, and, secondly, of a considerable force of horse bearing the cognizance of the House of Hardenberg. Worse than all, however, were seen, in the midst, two long wagons, dragged slowly forward by eight or ten bullocks, each displaying a large, clumsy-looking implement, somewhat like the lopped trunk of a tree, which he had little doubt were neither more nor less than the two great cannon of Landau, against which, if once brought

to bear upon the gates, the castle could not stand an hour. His only hope was, that their bulk and weight would render them unserviceable; but Count Frederick of Leiningen was seen to ride down instantly to meet his advancing allies, and by the time that night fell, two of the wheels had been detached from the wagons, together with the axle, and the larger cannon had been swung between them so dexterously, and with such an even balance, that it was moved without difficulty at least two or three hundred yards on the road to Eppenfeld.

The fall of night prevented it from being used immediately; but there it remained just before the gates, at the distance of perhaps two bowshots, haunting the imagination of the Baron with the thought of its fire on the succeeding day. Still he strove to make the evening meal pass cheerfully, and plenty of his best wine was poured forth to raise the courage of the soldiery; but, alas, without effect. The great gun of Landau was a sort of nightmare, which sat upon the stomachs of the stout men-at-arms; and a better means could not have been devised of sparing the provisions of the garrison, than by bringing it before the gates.

Some of the garrison drank deep indeed, either from pure recklessness, or a keen sense of danger, which they wished to get rid of by the pleasantest process at hand; but the wine seemed all to be poured into the great gun of Landau; for it certainly produced no greater effect upon those who imbibed it than it would have done upon that huge mass of wood and iron. The watch fires that were now seen blazing around the castle on every side, showed that the Leaguer was strict, and that no path of escape was unguarded; and though the Baron affected to be jovial, and to laugh at the Counts and their men, who were forced to sleep under the canopy of heaven, yet there was a wandering and uncertain look in his eye, and an anxious glance every now and then to the countenance of his friend Fritz, which told that the mind within was anything but easy.

At length, as if he could bear it no longer, the Baron rose, and beckoned his lieutenant into a little chamber in the neighbouring tower, where the propriety of a surrender, on conditions, was formally discussed, without any consideration of the ears that had been slit a few hours before.

"You had better send some one out, my lord," said Fritz, "to say that you will give up the prisoners and the treasure. I would not offer more at first; for, depend upon it, they'll demand more, and you can but grant at last."

"But who can I send?" said the Baron. "If I choose one of our own men, he will either get drunk amongst the enemy, or go over to their party."

"That's very likely," answered Fritz; "shall I go?"

"Humph! I can't spare you," said the Baron.

"Well, then, send one of the prisoners," rejoined Fritz. "If he stays, it can't be helped; and we can offer him reward if he comes back. We had better not let the men know anything about it."

This course was accordingly adopted. One of the men of Ehrenstein, who seemed the most sagacious of the party, was led by Fritz to a postern opposite to that which had been blocked up, and despatched with a message to the two Counts. Fritz remained to watch for his return upon the battlements above; and the Baron himself went back to the flask, to console expectation as well as he could.

"He will be here in a couple of hours, I dare say," said the Baron; but his enemies did not make him wait so long. At the end of an hour, Fritz appeared with the messenger, who bore a scrap of written paper in his hand.

"What the devil is this?" said the Baron, looking at it askance, as the man handed it to him. "Does he think we've clerks and shavelings here in Eppenfeld? Could he not speak plain German, and send message for message?"

Fritz gazed at it with the same hopeless look; but the messenger relieved them from their difficulty by saying, "He read it over to me twice; so I can tell you what it means. Let me look at the marks, however, to bring it in my mind. Thus it runs: 'Count Frederick of Leiningen,'--ay, that's his name there 'and the Count of Ehrenstein to the Baron of Eppenfeld.' He requires the immediate surrender of the castle, the restoration of the treasure taken from the Venetian merchants, compensation from the goods of the Baron for the wrong done and the trouble given. 'Upon these conditions his life shall be spared; but the castle shall be levelled with the ground, and never rebuilt.'"

The man paused; and the Baron of Eppenfeld swore an oath, such as probably no mouth but that of one of the robber chivalry of those days ever contained or gave vent to. It terminated, however, with a vow, that he would die under the ruins of his stronghold, sooner than submit to such conditions; and his worthy lieutenant was quite sure he would keep his word. Neither, it must be confessed, did Fritz himself greatly differ in opinion from his lord. The castle of Eppenfeld was, in fact, his principal means of subsistence; and, although he might perhaps have found some other, if it were taken away, yet there was none on the face of the earth that he thought worth living for; and a gallant defence and death, sword in hand, were things too frequently in the contemplation of persons in his station, to cause him much emotion at the prospect of their being realized.

Fritz, however, was somewhat shrewder in his observations than the Baron; and as soon as the latter had done blaspheming, the lieutenant inquired, addressing their messenger, "Whom did you see, fellow? You bring a letter from both the Counts; yet, when you speak of them, you say always, 'He,' as if only one had had a hand in it."

"I saw Count Frederick of Leiningen," answered the messenger; "but he said he had power to write for both, as my own lord was sleeping; and now I pray you send me back as you promised. It may go worse with you, if you do not."

"You shall go--you shall go," replied Fritz, "for you will have a message to take back;" and then drawing the Baron aside for a moment or two, he spoke to him eagerly in a whisper.

"By the eleven thousand virgins thou art right," cried the Lord of Eppenfeld at length; "so shall it be. Go back, rascal," he continued, addressing the messenger, "and tell Count Frederick that he shall rot before Eppenfeld, and I will eat the stones thereof, before I take such conditions. Tell him I care not for his bombards; the walls are proof against them, and he will find this hold a harder morsel than he thinks. That for Count Frederick!--But now mark me--seek out your own lord privately, and say to him that I love him better than his comrade, that I served him well in former times, and that if he will withdraw his people, and leave me to deal with Count Frederick alone, he shall have the treasure; but if not, I will send a message by nine of the clock to-morrow morning to him and his friend, just to remind him of how I did serve him many years ago. Mark me well, say every word just as I say it;" and he repeated the whole with great accuracy.

The man promised to obey, and, again conducted by Fritz, was led out of the castle.

"That will diminish them by one-half," said the Baron, as soon as his lieutenant returned to him, "and then for one bold stroke and victory."

Numerous discussions subsequently took place between the Lord of Eppenfeld and his friend, in regard to preparations for the morrow; numerous precautions were also taken; strict watch was enjoined; but then, alas! the Baron and Fritz also returned to the flask, and many others in the castle followed their example. The lieutenant, at a late hour, betook himself to the walls, where he found all in order, and paced up and down some time in a sort of dreamy state, where thought and wine contended for the mastery; but the hour of three found him sound asleep upon the battlements, with his head pillowed on a stone.

How long he remained thus Fritz did not know; but the first thing that woke him was a tremendous explosion just below. The whole castle shook; some of the loose stones fell from the watch-tower above, and well it was for Fritz, at that moment, that he had his steel morion on his head. He was hardly roused, however, his whole senses were in confusion and disarray, when loud shouts and cries from the court rose up, and conveyed him better intelligence of the event which had taken place than even the explosion; there were sounds of blows, and clashing steel, and of heavy axes falling upon wood-work, and exclamations of "Place taken! Place taken! Yield or die!" with many a similar speech, which showed clearly enough that the garrison was not alone in Eppenfeld.

The want of brute courage, however, was not the defect of Fritz's character, and the next instant he dashed down, sword in hand, to the court, collecting one or two of his comrades as he went, and exclaiming, "It is now for life! they will give no quarter! fight like devils! we may yet drive them back!" But the scene that presented itself in the court might have proved to any one willing to be convinced, that, fight how they would, the garrison of Eppenfeld had no chance of successful resistance. The gate had been partly blown in by the bombard, which had been quietly drawn close up to the walls, and was every moment presenting a wider aperture under the blows of the axe; an overpowering number of adverse soldiery was already in the court; others were rushing in through the gap in the gate; torches could be seen coming up the slope, and displaying a stream of human heads cased in iron pouring on. Everything proved that defence was hopeless, but the Baron of Eppenfeld was already below, and with fierce efforts, aided by some thirty of his men, was striving to drive back the assailants and recover possession of the gateway. Fritz and those who were with him hurried on to his assistance, and soon were hand to hand with the enemy. Their arrival gave some new vigour to the resistance, and the men of Leiningen and the citizens who were joined with them, gave way a little; but fresh numbers poured in behind; the Baron went down with a thundering blow upon his steel cap; and Fritz received a wound in the throat which covered his cuirass with gore.

With great difficulty the Lord of Eppenfeld was raised in the press, and borne somewhat back; but as soon as he could stand he rushed upon the enemy again, and aimed his blows around with the fury of despair. His men gradually gave way, however, a number fell never to rise again; but beaten back, step by step, they were, at length, forced against the wall of the donjon, with nothing but the narrow doorway behind them left as a means of escape. The man who was nearest it felt his courage yield, turned, and ran towards the postern on the east. Some cried, "I yield, I yield! good quarter, good quarter!" Others fled after the first, and the Baron of Eppenfeld, seeing that all was lost, looked round with glaring eyes, doubtful whether he should seek safety in flight by the postern into the open country, or die in arms where he stood.

At that very moment, however, a loud voice cried, "Take him alive! take him alive! The man with the wivern on his head!" and half a dozen of the soldiers of Leiningen rushed towards him.

One instantly went down under a blow of his sword, but before it could fall again upon the head of another, the rest were upon him, and the weapon was wrenched from his grasp.

A scene of wild confusion followed, which cannot be adequately described. There was chasing through passages and chambers, hunting out fugitives in remote places, driving them along the walls, seeking them in vaults and towers; and many a deep groan and shrill cry of the death agony attested that all the barbarous cruelties of a storming were perpetrated in the halls of Eppenfeld. Some were taken alive, but a greater number escaped by the postern into the country. There, however, they were almost instantly captured; for the bands of the Count of Ehrenstein had been left to keep guard without, and only two or three of the fugitives found their way to the woods.

In the mean time Count Frederick as soon as all resistance was over, strode on to the hall, with a small number of his attendants who had never left his side. There seating himself in the Baron's great chair, he ordered the room to be cleared of all persons but two, while a party remained to guard the door. His selection of his two councillors was somewhat strange, for, though one was indeed a person in whom he might be supposed to place confidence, being an old and faithful knight who had accompanied him through all his wars while serving with the knights of St. John, the other was no greater a personage than the jester, who, however, took his seat beside the Count with great gravity.

The next moment, according to orders previously given, the Baron of Eppenfeld was brought in between two men, with all his offensive arms taken from him, and his head uncovered. The two soldiers who guarded him there were instantly ordered to withdraw, and what followed between the victor and the vanquished was only known to the four who remained. The conversation was not long, however, for in less than five minutes the soldiers were recalled, and ordered to remove the Baron to his own chamber, treating him with courtesy.

The man named Fritz was next called for, and while the Count's followers were seeking for him, one of Count Frederick's knights brought him the keys of the treasure room, and a roll of papers. Several minutes elapsed before Fritz could be found, and just as he was discovered at length, lying severely wounded amongst the dead in the court, the Count of Ehrenstein, entered the castle with some of his attendants, and after inquiring where Count Frederick was, made his way to the hall, which he seemed to know well.

"Is the Baron living or dead?" he asked, as soon as he entered.

"Living, living, my noble friend," replied Count Frederick, in his usual gay tone. "Caught like a badger; dug out of his hole, and biting at all who came near him."

"He might as well have died," said the Count of Ehrenstein, with a cloudy brow; "we shall be troubled to know what to do with him."

"Nay, if he would not be killed, we cannot help it," cried Count Frederick; "though he seems a venomous snake indeed.--Ah! here comes his worthy comrade, Herr Fritz!--Cannot he stand? He seems badly hurt.--Well, noble Sir, I shall not trouble you with many questions, You, it seems, led the party who plundered our Italian merchants; whence got you tidings of their coming?"

"From one of your own people; Count," replied the wounded man. "I know not his name; but the Baron can tell you."

"Where is the Baron?" demanded the Count of Ehrenstein. "I will go and ask him."

"Nay, he is caged,--he is caged," answered Count Frederick. "We shall have time enough to question him hereafter."

His noble companion did not seem very well satisfied with his answer, but bent his eyes moodily on the ground; while the man Fritz took up the conversation, in a sullen tone, saying, "I hope you will not question me farther, my lord the Count; for I am faint from loss of blood, and it is high time that you should either have me tended, or end me at once."

"Nay, Heaven forfend, Herr Fritz!" exclaimed Count Frederick; "we shall want you hereafter, since you say it was one of my men who helped you to your rich booty. Take him away, and try and stanch the bleeding of his wounds. Give him some wine, if they have not drunk it all; and then bring me water, that I may wash my hands. Nay, why so grave, my noble fellow-soldier?" he continued, turning to the Count of Ehrenstein; "but it is true you have lived long in peace, and are not so much accustomed as myself to see scenes of slaughter and destruction; and yet we must leave no part of the work here undone. I will not quit Eppenfeld while there is one beam of timber spanning from wall to wall. Nevertheless, it is not needful that you should stay."

"Oh, I will bear you company," said he of Ehrenstein. "It is true I love not to see such things, yet still--"

"Nay, but it is needless," interrupted Count Frederick. "You shall guard the prisoners and the treasure back to Ehrenstein; while I will remain and see the nest of plunderers destroyed."

"And the Baron?" asked his friend, with a hesitating look. "He goes with you, of course,"

replied Count Frederick; "only keep him safe, for he is a wily fox."

"Oh, that I will," replied the other, with a countenance which suddenly brightened; "yet if I could aid you here, I am quite willing to stay."

"No need,--no need," answered Count Frederick. "I have men and means enough."

"Well, then, I will go and prepare for departure," said the Count of Ehrenstein, "and will give you a victor's banquet when you arrive."

Thus saying, he moved towards the door; and as he quitted the hall, Count Frederick of Leiningen gave a meaning glance, half sad, half sarcastic, first to the jester, and then to the old knight.

CHAPTER XX.

The whole castle of Ehrenstein was still as the grave. There are times when distant murmurs of busy life, when the hum of insects in the air, when the scarce heard voice of the distant nightingale, when the whisper of a passing breeze, that speaks as if but to make the stillness felt, seem to increase the sensation of the silence. But there is a deeper, deader silence than that, when all is so profoundly tranquil that it seems as if no sound would ever wake again, when death itself seems powerful over all; and the absence of all activity makes us feel as if our own being was the only living principle left existent upon earth. But it brings with it no idea of annihilation. It seems but the utter exclusion of all mortal things, as if the animation of clay were over, and the noiseless reign of spirit were begun. The soul, no longer jostled by the life of flesh, seems to walk forth at large, and to have freer communication with things as immaterial as itself. The essence within us feels as if a thick and misty veil were withdrawn, and things unseen in the dull glare of the animal day were apparent to the kindred spirit in the hour of temporary death. But this is only felt when entire silence pervades all things; when there is no voice of bird or insect, no whispered breeze, no distant sound of those that watch at night; when all is still, and, to the ignorance of individual being, it seems that the one who feels is the only one who lives. Then is the hour of expectation; for if, according to the old philosophy, nature abhors a vacuum, the void she most abhors is the absence of all action. The heart of every living thing is ever asking, "What next?" and the deepest conviction implanted in the mind of man is, that want of activity is extinction. Even sleep itself has its sensation and its dream; and to him who wakes while all the rest are buried in forgetfulness, there is a constant looking for something assimilating in solemnity with the hour, and the darkness, and the silence, to break the unnatural lack of busy life that seems around. Oh! how fancy then wanders through the wide unoccupied extent, and seeks for something active like itself, and, debarred all communion with beings of earth, ventures into the unsubstantial world, and perchance finds a responding voice to answer her cry for companionship.

It would seem that there is almost a contradiction in terms under the philosophy that admits the existence of a world of spirits, and yet denies that there can be any means of communication between that world and the spirits still clothed in flesh; but, even in the most sceptical, there are misdoubtings of their own unbelief; and to every one who thinks, there come moments when there arise such questions as these: Where lies the barrier between us and those above us--between us and those who have gone before? Can we speak across the gulf? Is it bridged over by any path? Is there a gulf indeed?--or, in this instance, as in all others through the universal scheme, is the partition but thin and incomplete that separates us from the order next above?

Such are at least questions with all but the most purely worldly even in a most purely worldly age; but, in the times I write of, doubts on such subjects were precluded by faith and by tradition. Activity, indeed, and thought, occupied continually by matters the least spiritual, banished reflections upon such subjects during the great part of each man's time. But reflection was needless where conviction was ever present; and if speculation indulged itself in times of solitude and silence, it was only in regard to what our relations could be with the immaterial world, not whether there were any relations at all.

Everything was still and motionless as the grave when Ferdinand descended slowly from his chamber in the castle of Ehrenstein, and entered the broad corridor which stretched across the great mass of the building. It was very dark, for no moon was up; and, though the stars were bright and many in the sky, the light they afforded through the dim casements was but small. The night was still, too; for no wind moved the trees; not a cloud crossed the sky; and, as it was colder than it had been, the insects ceased for a time from their activity, too early begun, and the song of the minstrel of the night was not heard. Everyone in the castle itself seemed sound

asleep; no doors creaked on the hinges, no voice of guest or serving-man was heard from below, the very sentinel was keeping guard still and silently, like the starry watchers in the sky overhead.

Ferdinand's heart beat quick, but it was not with the thought of all the strange and fearful sights he had seen in the place which he was now about to revisit--though he did think of them; it was not with that vague mysterious awe inspired by any near approach in mind to things beyond this world of warm and sunny life. He was going, for the first time, at night and in darkness, to the chamber of her he loved, to guide her through strange scenes, alone and unwatched for many an hour to come, upon an errand of which he knew nothing but that it was promised a happy end; and his whole frame thrilled with the emotions so sweet, so joyful, that are only known to early, pure, and ardent love.

With the unlighted lamp in his hand, he approached the door, and quietly raised the latch. All was silent in the little anteroom, but there was a light burning there, and Bertha sitting sleeping soundly in a chair, with some woman's work fallen at her feet. Ferdinand did not wake her; for Adelaide had told him to come when it was needful, even to her own chamber; and, approaching the door of that room, he opened it quietly, and went in. Adelaide slept not, for in her heart, too, were busy emotions that defy slumber. As she saw him, she sprang to meet him, with all the joy and confidence of love; but yet it was with a glow in her cheek, and a slight agitated trembling of her limbs, which she could not overcome, though she knew not why she shook, for she had no fears--she no longer had any doubts of her own acts.

"I am ready, Ferdinand," she whispered, after one dear caress; "let us go at once--nay, love, let us go."

He led her silently into the next room, where the lover lighted his lamp; and the lady gently woke her sleeping maid, and whispered her to watch for their return. Then onward through the corridor they went, and down the stairs, till they reached the door of the great hall.

"Hark!" whispered Adelaide, "did you not hear a sound?"

"We may hear many, dear one," answered the young gentleman in the same tone; "aye, and we may see strange and fearful sights too, but we will not let them daunt us, my beloved. I have trod these paths before, and they are familiar to me; but to you, love, they are new, and may be frightful. Look not around, then, dear girl; rest on my arm, keep your eyes on the ground, and give ear to no sound. I will guide you safely."

Thus saying, he opened the hall door carefully, and, with some feeling of relief, saw that all within was dark and silent. Closing it as soon as they had passed the threshold, he gazed around, but nothing was to be seen but the drooping branches with which they had ornamented the walls, hanging sickly and languid in the first process of decay, and the flowers with which they had chapleted the columns already withered and pale. Such are the ambitions and the joys of youth, and thus they pass away.

"It is quiet, dear Adelaide," whispered Ferdinand. "May our whole way be equally so. All evil spirits surely will keep aloof from an angel's presence."

"Hush!" she said; "I fear not, Ferdinand, for I feel as if I were engaged in a high duty, and till it is accomplished I am eager to go on. I can walk quicker now."

He led her on at a more rapid pace, unlocked the smaller door at the other end of the hall, and, keeping her arm in his, entered the dark and gloomy passage. Adelaide, notwithstanding his caution, looked up and said, "It is a foul and sad-looking place, Indeed;" but she neither paused nor slackened her steps, and in a few moments more they stood at the mouth of the well stairs.

"Put your hand on my shoulder, dearest," said Ferdinand; "and take heed to every step; for all are damp and slippery, and many of the stones decayed. Lean firmly upon me as I go down before you."

She did as he told her; but as they descended amidst mould and slimy damp, and heavy air, the whispering voices he had heard again sounded on the ear, and Adelaide's heart beat, though she resisted terror to the utmost. "Fear not, dear girl--fear not," he said; "we shall soon be in the free air of the wood."

She made no reply, but followed quickly, and at length they reached the door below. As he pushed it open, a voice seemed to say, "They come--they come. Hush, hush!" and he led her on into the serfs' burial-place.

"There is a light," whispered Adelaide. "Good heavens! there must be some one here."

"No one that will slay us," answered her lover. "It will soon be past, dear girl." As he spoke, however, he raised his eyes, and saw a faint light gleaming from the heavy column to which the skeleton was chained; and as undaunted he advanced, he saw written on the green stone, as if in characters of flame, the word, "Vengeance!" and as he gazed, low voices repeated, "Vengeance--vengeance!"

He felt his fair companion tremble terribly; but now she bent down her eyes, as he had bidden her, for she feared that her courage would give way. The next instant, however, she started and paused, for she had well nigh put her foot upon a skull, the grinning white teeth of which, and rayless eye-holes, were raised towards her. "Ah, Ferdinand!" she exclaimed; but he hurried her past, and on towards the crypt of the chapel.

"Stay, stay," said Adelaide, as they passed through the low arch which led thither. "This is very terrible; I feel faint."

"Yet a few steps farther," answered Ferdinand; "the free air will soon revive you, and we shall be there in a moment."

As he spoke, there came suddenly, from the lower chapel vaults before them, a slow and solemn chant, as if several deep voices were singing a dirge, and Ferdinand and Adelaide paused and listened while they sang:--

DIRGE.

Peace to the dead! They rest
Calm in the silent bed.
They have tasted joy and sorrow;
They have lived and grieved,
Have loved and been blest;
Nor thought of this dark to-morrow.
Peace to the happy dead!

Peace to the dead! No more
On them shall earth's changes shed
The blight of all joy and pleasure.
Their life is above,
In the haven of love,
And their heart is with its treasure.
Peace to the happy dead!

Though it was a sad and solemn air, and though the distinct words were of as serious a character as the lips of man can pronounce, yet they seemed rather to revive than to depress the spirits of Adelaide; and as the music ceased, and the falling sounds died away in the long aisles, she said,

"I can go on now, Ferdinand. It is true there is something else to live for than the life of this earth! and the very feeling that it is so, and the keeping of that always before one's mind, seem not only to hallow but to brighten the loves and joys of this being, when we remember that if they are what they ought to be, they may be protracted into eternity. I have been weak and cowardly, more than I thought to be; but I will be so no more. The thought of death makes me brave."

Ferdinand was silent, for he felt that his love, if not more mortal, was at least more human than hers; but he led her on, and now she gazed around her by the light of the lamp, marking the coffins that were piled up, and the monuments that were mingled with them,--now and then commenting, by a word or two, as the faint rays fell first upon one and then upon another, till at length they reached the door which gave them exit into the forest, where the free air seemed to revive her fully.

"Thank God!" she said, when they once more stood upon the side of the hill. "How delightful it is to feel the wind upon one's cheek! After all, this earth is full of pleasant things; and though the contemplation of death and its presence may be salutary, yet they are heavy upon the heart from their very solemnity. How shall we ever get down this steep part of the rock?"

"Stay," said Ferdinand, who had been shading the light with his cloak; "I will put the lamp within the door, and leave it burning; we shall need it when we return. The way is not so steep as it seems, dearest, and I will help and guide you."

After securing the light, the young man returned to her side, as she stood upon the little jutting pinnacle of crag, and aided her down the descent; nor was the task aught but a very sweet one, for still her hand rested in his, and often, perhaps without much need, his arm glided round her waist to support her as she descended, and words of love that they could now speak, fearless of overhearing ears, were uttered at every pause upon their way. A gayer and a happier spirit, too, seemed to come upon the fair girl after they had left the crypt; sometimes, indeed, strangely mingled with a tone of sadness, but still full of hope and tenderness. She even somewhat jested with her lover on his passion, and asked in playful words, if he was sure, very sure, of his own heart?--if their situations were altogether changed by some of the strange turns of fate, and she but a poor dowerless maiden, without station or great name, and he a prince of high degree, whether his love would be the same?--whether he would still seek her for his bride as ardently as then?

I need not, surely, tell how Ferdinand answered her;--I need not say what professions he made,--or how he once revenged himself for her assumed doubts of a passion as true as her own.

She made him promise a thousand things too--things that to him seemed strange and wild: that he would never willingly do aught that might break her heart,--that, if ever they were married, he would for one month--for one short, sweet month--do everything that she required. She made him promise--nay, she made him vow it; and he was inclined to engage largely for such sweet hopes as she held out; so that had a universe been at his command, and all the splendours of destiny within his reach, he would have given all, and more, for the bright vision that her words called up; and yet he somewhat laughed at her exactions, and gave his promise as playfully as she seemed to speak. But she would have it seriously, she said, and made him vow it over and over again.

Thus went they on, descending the hill, and spending more time by the way, in truth, than was altogether needful, till they came within sight of the little chapel in the wood; and there a new mood seemed to come over Ferdinand's fair companion. She stopped suddenly, and gazing, by the faint light of the stars, upon the countenance which memory served to show her more than her eyes, she asked, "And do you really love me, Ferdinand? and will you ever love me as now?"

"I do--I will for ever, Adelaide," he answered, drawing her nearer to him,--"ever, ever!"

But she, of her own accord, cast her arms around his neck, and leaning her head upon his shoulder, seemed to him to weep. He pressed her to his heart, he whispered all those words that he thought might soothe and reassure her, but still she remained the same, till the door of the chapel, which was about a hundred yards before them, opened, and by the light which streamed out, Ferdinand saw the form of Father George, looking forth as if anxious for their coming.

"He is looking for us, dearest," he said; "let us go on."

"I am ready--I am ready," replied Adelaide; and, wiping away what were certainly drops from her eyes, she followed at once.

CHAPTER XXI.

"I have been anxious for you, my children," said Father George, as they entered his little chamber by the side of the chapel. "What, weeping, Adelaide! Are you not happy? Have you a doubt?"

"None, none," she answered, holding out her hand to Ferdinand. "I know not why you sent for us, Father, but I am sure that whatever you counsel is right, and I feel that my fate is linked to his, as my heart is to his heart, and his to mine, I do believe; but there are other tears than sad ones, good Father, and though mine are not sad, they might well be so, considering all the objects on the path hither."

"Say, solemn, rather, my child," answered Father George; "but for the rest: if you can love and do love, as I believe, there is happiness before you. Are you prepared, Adelaide, to bind yourself to him you love by bonds that cannot be broken?"

She looked down, and the blood mounting into her cheek, then left it as pale as alabaster; but her lips moved, and in a lone tone, she said, "I am."

"And you, Ferdinand," continued the priest, "are you prepared, at all risks, to wed this fair lady--not with the vehement and ardent fire of youth, though that I know you feel, but with the steadfast purpose and desire to make her reasonable happiness, your great end and object of existence; to seek it by all means, and at all times; to do her right in every word, and thought, and deed; to be to her what God intended man to be to woman, her support and strength, her protection and her comfort, more than a friend, more than a brother, more than a lover--one with herself in every good wish and purpose? Answer me thoughtfully, my son, for I take a great responsibility upon me. I counsel her to give her hand to you against every worldly custom and all human policy; and if you ever make her regret that deed, the sorrow and the shame will rest on me."

"I am ready, Father," answered Ferdinand, "to take her hand as the best gift that Heaven could give me, on the conditions and in the terms you say. We are not like many others, Father, we have known each other from youth's early days, when childhood has no concealments, and the heart is without disguise. Deep affection and sincere regard have ripened, on my part at least, into love that never can change, for one whose heart I know too well to doubt that it can alter either. Whatever dangers may beset our way--and I see many--there will be none from changed affection.--But I beseech you play not with my hopes. I know not much of such things, it is true, but I have heard that there are difficulties often insuperable in the way of those who, at our age

and in our circumstances, would unite their fate together."

"There are, my son," answered Father George; "but in your case I have removed them. Here, under my hand," he continued, laying it as he spoke upon a roll of parchment on the table, "I have a dispensation from our Holy Father, the Pope, for your immediate marriage; and for weighty reasons which I have stated to him by the mouth of his Legate, he gives me full authority and power to celebrate it whenever occasion shall serve. No moment could be more favourable than the present--no moment when it is more needful. Dangers, my son, there may be; but they are not such as you anticipate; and watchful eyes are upon you to ward off anything that may menace; but fail not either of you, if you see the slightest cause for alarm, to give me warning by some means; and now, my children, come with me; for the night wears, and you must not be long absent."

Ferdinand took Adelaide's hand in his, and followed the priest into the chapel, by the small door, in the side of his little room, which led almost direct to the altar. He gazed at her fondly as he went, and joy, the deepest he had ever felt in life, was certainly in his heart; but there was something in the hour and the circumstances which softened and solemnized without decreasing that joy. Adelaide turned but one momentary glance on him, and it was almost sad, yet full of love. There was anxiety in it--ay, and fear over and above the timid emotion with which woman must always take that step which decides her fate for happiness or unhappiness through life. She seemed less surprised indeed at all that had taken place with the good priest than her lover. The object for which Father George had sent for them did not appear so unexpected to her as it did to him. It seemed as if she had had a presentiment or a knowledge of what was to come; and Ferdinand now understood the agitation which she had displayed just before they entered Father George's cell. She went on, however, without hesitation--ay, and without reluctance, and in a moment after they stood together before the altar. The candles thereon were already lighted, and a small gold ring lay upon the book. All seemed prepared beforehand, but ere Father George commenced the ceremony, he bade Ferdinand unlock the chapel door and leave it ajar. As soon as the lover had returned to Adelaide's side, the words which were to bind them together for weal or woe, through life, began. She answered firmly, though in a low tone; and when the ring was at length on her finger, Ferdinand heard, or thought he heard, a voice without murmur, "It is done!"

The fair girl marked it not; but, as if overcome by all the emotions of that hour, stretched out her arms to her young husband, and leaned upon his breast. She wept not, but she hid her eyes, saying in an earnest but trembling tone, "Oh, dear Ferdinand, remember, remember all you have promised."

"I will, love, I will," he answered. "You are my own, sweet bride; and I will ever cherish you as the better part of my own life. Shall I now lead her back, Father?"

"Nay," said the priest, "there is more yet to be done. The church's part is over, and the bond irrevocable; but yet the laws of the land require something more, and every form must be fulfilled. But all is prepared. Come with me once more, and sign the contract. Then, after a moment's rest, you may go back--Yes," he added, after some thought and apparent hesitation, "you had better go back for this night at least. But I will not trust you to stay there long. You are both too young, too inexperienced, and too fond, to conceal from the eyes of others the bond that is between you. Keep yourselves ready, however, and I will arrange the means for your flight, and a safe asylum."

"Could we not go at once," asked Ferdinand, as they followed to the priest's chamber, "to the house of good Franz Creussen? He seems to know much of my fate, and to love me well."

"Not to-night, not to-night," answered Father George; "you forget who may be met on the way thither. Nay, return for this night, and be cautious where you are. Ere to-morrow you shall hear more; but in the mean time, in case of need, no arm will be found stronger to aid, no heart more ready to serve you, than that of good Franz Creussen. You may trust to him in any case, for he does love you well, and has proved his love to you and yours, ere now." The contract was signed; and, when all was complete, the priest opened the door, saying, "Keep the key I have given you carefully, Ferdinand, it may serve you in many ways; but to-morrow you shall either see or hear from me. And now, farewell, my children, God's benison and the holy church's be upon you!"

With this blessing they departed; and Adelaide and Ferdinand returned to the castle more slowly even than they had come thence. It often happens in life that one emotion drowns another; and although they could not but know that there were dangers of many kinds before them, and though the gloomy scenes which they had so lately passed through still lay on their road back, yet the rapturous joy of the moment, the knowledge that they were united beyond the power of fate, as they thought, to sever them, swallowed up apprehension and awe, and left nought but one of those wild visions of happiness which occasionally break upon the night of life.

As on the occasion of Ferdinand's former visit, neither sights nor sounds that could create alarm awaited them on their return. The untrimmed lamp stood burning faintly where they had left it, and passing quickly through the vaults, they soon reached the hall above. There they lingered for some time, and then extinguishing the light, found their way through the other passages, and up the stairs; but the grey eye of morning was faintly opening on the world when the young husband returned to his own chamber. Casting himself on his bed, he strove to sleep;

but for nearly an hour the wild emotions of his heart kept him waking, and then for a short time he slept with heavy and profound slumber. What it was that woke him he knew not, but he raised himself with a sudden start, and looked round as if some one had called. He saw that the sun had climbed higher than he had imagined, and rising, he dressed himself hastily, but with care, then gazed for a single instant in sweet thought out of the window, and breaking of his reverie, suddenly turned to the door. He fancied he must be still dreaming when he found that it would not yield to his hand. He shook it vehemently, but it did not give way. He strove to burst it open, but it resisted all his efforts.

"This is strange, indeed!" he said to himself, with his thoughts all whirling and confused, in agitation, anger, and apprehension; for where there is ought to be concealed, fear has always some share in the sensations which any event unaccounted for produces. After a moment's thought, however, he calmed himself, and walking to the casement, looked down upon the wall below. The height was considerable, and no sentinel was underneath at the moment; but the measured tread of a heavy foot was heard round the angle of the tower; and the young gentleman waited calmly till the man paced round, and came under the spot where he stood. "Ho! Rudolph," he said, "some one, in sport, I suppose, has locked my door; go in and bid them open it."

The man obeyed, but returned in a minute or two after with another, who looked up to the window, saying, as soon as he saw the young gentleman's face, "It is that young fellow, Martin of Dillberg, Sir, who has locked it; and he will not give up the keys declaring he has a charge to make against you when our lord returns, and that he will keep you there till he does."

Ferdinand's heart beat a good deal with very mixed sensations, but he answered instantly,-- "Who commands in this castle when the Count and his knights are away?"

"Why you, Sir, certainly," answered Rudolph; "but I can't see how we can help you, as the lock is on your side of the door, and we dare not venture to lay hands on Count Frederick's man. Can you not contrive to push back the bolt with your dagger?"

"I have tried while you were away," answered Ferdinand. "Hie you to the stable, Rudolph, bring me one of the strong ropes you will find there, fix it on the end of your lance, and stretch the end up to me. I will soon teach this Martin of Dillberg who has the gravest charge to make against the other."

The two men hastened to obey; and Ferdinand remained at the casement, anxiously looking for their return. Ere they appeared, however, he heard their voices speaking apparently to another person; and one of the soldiers exclaimed aloud,-- "Get you gone, Sir! You have no command here. If you attempt to take hold of it I will break your pate; and if Master Ferdinand, when he gets out, bids us shut you up for your pains, we will do it."

"Rudolph! Herman!" shouted Ferdinand from the window, "make sure of his person. He is a traitor and a knave!"

The men did not hear him, but came on, carrying between them a heavy coil of rope, the end of which was speedily stretched out upon the point of the lance, to such a height that he could reach it. Then fastening it rapidly to the iron bar which separated the casement into two, Ferdinand took the rope between his hands and feet, and slid down upon the platform.

"Now follow me, quick," he cried. "Where is this treacherous hound? By Heaven! I have a mind to cleave his skull for him."

"He was just now at the steps going down to the court," replied the man Herman; "but you had better not use him roughly, Sir. Shut him up till our lord returns."

"Come on then, come on," cried Ferdinand, still hurrying forward; "we shall lose our hold of him. He dare not stay and face me."

It was as he thought, for by the time he reached the court, Martin of Dillberg was mounted and passing the drawbridge. A sneering smile of triumph and malice curled his lip as Ferdinand advanced under the arch, and turning his horse for an instant, he exclaimed, "I go to give news of you to your friends, good Sir. Pray where were you at midnight? You, my good men, if you will follow my advice, will keep that youth within the castle walls, for he is a traitor to his lord and yours, as I will prove upon him at my return."

Thus saying, he wheeled his horse and spurred away; and Ferdinand, with as light a look as he could assume, turned back into the castle. The two men paused for a minute to converse together, and Ferdinand, hurrying on, passed twice through the corridor with a heavy step, in the hope that Bertha might hear him and come forth. She did not appear, however, and then going out to the battlements, he passed by the window where she usually sat and worked. She was there, and alone, and making a sign towards the corridor, he returned thither without delay. In a few minutes the gay girl joined him, but she instantly saw from his look that something had gone amiss, and her warm cheek turned somewhat pale in anticipation of his tidings.

"Hie you to Father George with all speed, Bertha," said Ferdinand; "tell him that I fear that young hound, Martin of Dillberg, has tracked me and your lady to the chapel last night, or else saw me come forth from her chamber. Bid him hasten to help us, or we are lost, for the young

villain is gone to bear the news to the Count. Hark!--there are trumpets!" and springing to the window, he looked out.

"The Count, upon my life!" he exclaimed. "Away, Bertha, away!"

"But I shall meet them!" exclaimed the girl, wildly; "and I shake so, I am ready to drop."

"Here, take this key," cried Ferdinand; "it opens the small door out of the great hall; then straight on along the passage, down the well stairs, and through the vaults--straight as you can go. You cannot miss your way. If you would save me, your lady, and yourself, you must shake off all idle terrors. You have now full daylight, and it streams into the vaults as clear as it does here. Leave the door unlocked behind you."

"I will go," said Bertha, "if all the ghosts in the church-yard were there. But I must first warn my lady;" and away she sped.

CHAPTER XXII.

With blast of trumpet, and an air of triumph, the small force of the Count of Ehrenstein marched up towards the gates of the castle. Each individual soldier, long deprived of the means of winning any renown in those "piping times of peace," felt an individual pride in having fought and conquered; though, to say sooth, the two knights, and older warriors were not very well contented that so small and inglorious a part of the short siege of Eppenfeld had fallen to their share. The youths might boast, they thought, and plume themselves upon so poor an exploit, and some little honour might attach to those who had taken a share in the first operations; but the days had been when the men of Ehrenstein would not have remained inactive, watching to catch the runaways, while the retainers of a friendly prince assailed the castle itself, and underwent all the danger and fatigue of the assault. The Count was brave and politic, they admitted, and policy has always something in it which commands a sort of mysterious respect. We admire what is successful, though we do not understand the principles upon which success has been achieved; but yet, until discipline has reached a high pitch, we do not conceive that there can be as much glory in performing well a passive part, as in taking a share in operations where peril and energetic action are the means of victory. Thus many of the best soldiers in the Count's band were somewhat discontented, and inclined to grumble, while he himself rode on in silence, communicating to no one his feelings in regard to the result of their undertaking, or to the plan upon which the enterprise had been conducted. He had prisoners and treasure with him; and that, old Seckendorf thought, would be enough to satisfy the Count; but the good ritter himself was dissatisfied that he had not an opportunity of striking a strong stroke, and longed for a more energetic and less politic leader, although he owned that but little was to be done in those days of art and negotiation, compared with the times when he himself was young, and the sword decided all.

Very different is the operation of every passion upon the individual on whom it acts. As the relative forces of agent and object always modify the effect of every cause, the character of the person who feels changes entirely the result of the emotions which act upon him. Some men are elated by success; some almost depressed in spirit. With some men the heart seems to expand under the sunshine of fair fortune, with some to contract; as particular flowers open in the shade, while others spread their breasts abroad to the bright day. The Count of Ehrenstein was one on whom the light seemed to have no enlarging influence; and while his men, especially the younger, laughed and talked, he rode on from Eppenfeld towards his own stronghold, in gloomy silence and deep thought. Hardly one word proffered he to any one by the way, and ever and anon he looked back to the body of prisoners with the Baron at their head, who followed, strongly guarded, in the rear of his troop. Then, and only then, what may be called a feeble look came over his countenance--a look of doubt and hesitation, as if he were trying some question with his own heart, which he found it difficult to solve.

At a short distance from the castle he was met by Martin of Dillberg, who stopped and spoke to him for a few minutes in a low voice. Those who were near saw an expression of sudden anger spread over the face of their lord; his pale cheek flushed, his brow grew black as night, his hands grasped the reins tight, and he replied in quick and hurried tones. But after a time the young man rode on towards Eppenfeld, and the troop, which had halted, recommenced its march. The fierce look of the Count, however, speedily passed away; he turned his eyes again to the Baron, and once more fell into gloomy thought.

At the end of about half an hour, the cavalcade approached the gates of Ehrenstein, and the Count passed over the drawbridge, and under the arch of the gateway, where Ferdinand of

Altenburg stood, with some of the soldiery, to receive him. If, as I have said, the operations of passions are very different upon different individuals, the fact was never more strikingly displayed than in the case of Ferdinand. He knew that a moment of great peril had arrived, he felt that the purchase of a few hours of joy might now have to be paid in his blood; he feared also for her he loved more than for himself; but the emotions of such a situation called forth in his mind powers of which he had been ignorant: and although at first he had been agitated and almost bewildered, he now stood calm and collected, marking well the heavy frown upon the Count's brow, and a look of sudden fierceness that came into his face when their eyes first met, but prepared for whatever might follow and ready to endure it firmly.

The Count of Ehrenstein dismounted slowly, and, without addressing a word to his young follower, called Seckendorf and Mosbach to him, giving them directions for lodging the prisoners securely, and especially for placing the Baron of Eppenfeld in a chamber apart, in one of the high towers. He then spoke a word or two in a low tone to Karl von Mosbach, which seemed somewhat to surprise him; but the Count repeated aloud and emphatically, "Not for one moment! You will soon know the reason." Then turning to Ferdinand he said, "Has all gone quietly in the castle?"

"No, my good lord," replied the young gentleman, boldly. "That youth, Martin of Dillberg, who came hither with Count Frederick, dared to lock me in my chamber, and has since fled on horseback. I should have pursued him and brought him back, but I had no horses saddled."

"He will come back very soon," said the Count, in a marked tone.

"I doubt it, my good lord," answered Ferdinand; "he knows that I have a charge to bring against him which may cost his life; and which, if I had been permitted to join you before Eppenfeld, I should have made ere now."

"Indeed," said the Count musing; "it may be so."

"Nay, noble Sir, it is," replied the young gentleman, thinking the Count's words were an answer to what he had said, rather than to what was passing in his own mind; "I am ready to state the whole now, if you have time; for as I see the Baron of Eppenfeld is a prisoner in your hands, you have the means of testing the truth at once."

"Not now," rejoined the Count; "not now,--I have other matters to think of. I will hear you in an hour."

As he spoke, the Baron was led past, and the Lord of Ehrenstein immediately followed. Ferdinand remained musing in the court, not daring to seek any means of communicating with his young bride, and doubtful what course to follow.

As he thus stood, Seckendorf came up, and drawing him aside, demanded, "What is this, Ferdinand? Mosbach, tells me he has orders not to suffer you to pass the gates, or to take a step beyond the walls, the little hall, or the tower in which you sleep. What have you been doing, you graceless young dog? Is your affair with Bertha come to light?"

Ferdinand saw that his apprehensions were but too just, but he replied calmly, "I know not what our lord suspects, Seckendorf: he mentioned no charge against me to myself; but doubtless, whatever it is, it springs from the malice of Martin of Dillberg, who is right well aware that when this affair of the plunder of the Italian merchants is inquired into, his treason to his lord will be apparent."

"Ay, ay; is it so?" cried Seckendorf. "I saw him stop the Count and speak with him just now. What! I suppose he has been dealing with the Baron, and was to have shared the booty?"

"Something like it, I believe," answered Ferdinand; "but as the Baron is here, he can prove the truth of what he told me."

"So then the tale came from him," said Seckendorf; "I fear it is not to be trusted."

"It was spoken in the presence of many of his people and of some of ours," answered Ferdinand. "However, it is my duty to repeat what he told me; and if he has not had some communication with Martin of Dillberg, I see not how his tongue could be so glib with his name, as the youth has but lately returned with Count Frederick from the East."

"Right, right," answered Seckendorf; "thou art as shrewd as a blood-hound, Ferdinand. Doubtless the lad is afraid of thy tale, and has brought some charge against thee to cover his own treachery."

"It may be so,--it may not," answered Ferdinand. "However, Mosbach must obey our lord's behest, so I will even take myself to the battlements, which are within the limits you have mentioned."

Thus saying, he turned away, and walked up to the wall, gazing anxiously towards Father George's cell, yet taking care to pace up and down with as unconcerned an air as possible, that no eye watching him from the main building or its manifold towers might see the anxious expectation of his heart, or judge in what direction his thoughts turned. It were vain to deny that

he revolved, with eager rapid emotions, all the circumstances of his fate, and strove to discover some cause of hope; some clue to escape from the dangers that menaced him on every side. At one time it seemed impossible that anything but the most fatal result could ensue. He knew the Count too well to think that he would be merciful--he knew the customs, if not the laws, of the land too well, not to feel certain that his death would be deemed only a reasonable atonement for the deed he had ventured to do. But then, again, he asked himself, would the good priest who had been as a father to him from his infancy, sanction, counsel, aid him in an enterprise so perilous to all concerned in it, unless he had the most positive assurance that he could guide the course he had pointed out to a happy termination, and shield those from peril who, in following the dictates of their own inclination, had also followed his advice and exhortation. But still apprehension predominated; and though, at each turn he took, his eyes were directed to the little chapel in the wood, his hopes were destined to be disappointed. The door of the priest's cell he could not see, but he caught several glimpses of the road, and the second time he reached the point where he had the best view, he saw a female figure--which he instantly concluded to be that of Bertha--approach the chapel, and disappear behind the angle of the building. It scarcely was obscured a moment ere it reappeared again, and then was lost in the wood, "She has not found him," said Ferdinand to himself; "he is absent--was ever anything so unfortunate?" and he turned again upon the battlements lost in thought.

In the mean while, the Count of Ehrenstein had followed close upon the steps of those who led the Baron of Eppenfeld to the place of his imprisonment; and the door was not yet fully bolted and barred when he caused it to be opened again, and entered, directing the three soldiers who had conveyed the captive thither to wait at the foot of the stairs till he came out. Then, closing the door behind him, he confronted the prisoner with a stern brow, and teeth close shut. The Baron gave him back look for look; and a smile, slight but sarcastic, curled his lip.

"Well, Baron of Eppenfeld," said the Count; and then paused.

"Well, Count of Ehrenstein," replied the Baron; and he also stopped in the midst, for the other to go on.

"You sent me a message, last night," said the Count; "and you were fool enough, in your drunken sleepiness, not to take advantage of the opportunity given you, and to suffer the hot-headed Count of Leiningen to blow your gates open, when you might have escaped two hours before."

"Very unlucky for you, Count," replied the Baron of Eppenfeld, in a tone of provoking coolness. "You should have sent me some answer to my message, and then I should have known how to act."

"I could not; I had no time; I had no opportunity," answered the Count of Ehrenstein. "All I could do, after I received that message, was to withdraw my men to the east, and leave you room to escape with all your treasure."

"But why answered you not the first," asked the Baron; "the message that I sent you by young Ferdinand of Altenburg?--I thought better of it after a time, it is true, and judged that a short repose in Eppenfeld would do him good; but when he got out, he must have told you what I said, which was just the same thing; and instead of a friendly reply or friendly comment, your first act was to march against me."

"And you told Ferdinand of Altenburg?" said the Count, with a moody look. "Pray, what was it you told him?"

"The same, as near as may be," answered the Baron, "that I told the other."

"The other is dead," replied the Count; "and Ferdinand of Altenburg is in peril. You shall judge, by the way in which I treat him, how I deal with those who possess perilous secrets."

Thus saying, he opened the door, called one of the soldiers from the bottom of the stairs, and, when he reached the room, bade him hasten to Karl von Mosbach, and direct him to arrest Ferdinand of Altenburg, and place him in confinement in the dark cell below the lesser hall. "Now, Baron," he said, as soon as the man was gone, "What think you, now?"

"That you are a hard-hearted villain," answered the Baron, "and ten times worse than myself, bad as men call me. The youth served you well and boldly; he risked his life, I can tell you, to do your bidding, and this is the way you repay him. But I don't believe it; you will not injure him for any words he has heard from me."

"If I live till noon to-morrow," answered the Count, in a cold, deliberate tone, "he shall lose his head by the axe, upon those battlements."

"Then, there will be rare chopping," answered the Baron, with a laugh; "for eight or nine of your men heard the message I sent--the words were addressed to him, but they were spoken in the hearing of many."

"This is no jesting matter, Baron," said the Count; "let me tell you that your own life or death is the question. I shall give this youth time to prepare, for he is my own sworn follower, and no

one can see or tamper with him. But your case is different; and all the time I can allow you is one hour, for the questions between us must be despatched before the return of those who are now destroying the wolf's den."

Even this stern announcement seemed to have but a small effect upon the captive. "All which that shows," he answered, with a shrug of the shoulders, "is, that you take little time to deliberate upon murdering a prisoner. You cannot frighten me, Count of Ehrenstein! I have confronted death many a time a month, during twenty years or more; and if in all this talking you have some object in view, you had better speak it plainly at once, and not strive to reach it by threats."

"Should I not be a fool to trust you living," asked the Count, "when you can use such threats to me?"

"Oh, dear! no," answered his prisoner; "whatever I have done, I have never broken an oath in my life; and I am quite ready to relieve you from all fears, upon certain conditions."

"Ha!" said the Count, "what may they be?"

"First, that you will give me the means of escape," answered the Baron.

"At the present moment that is impossible," replied the Count; "but to-night it may be done. What more?"

"Secondly, I must have some small sum of gold to get me together a band in some distant country. If I were to go wandering about here without my stone walls around me, I should soon be caught, and I have no mind to find myself embroiled with the Imperial Court. I will be content with a small amount; and the third condition is, that you deal not harshly with that youth Ferdinand. On my life! I believe he neither knows nor suspects anything from what I said. He seemed not to heed it, as if he thought you to be too honest a man to do aught that was wrong. He paid much more attention to what I said concerning Count Frederick, and Martin of Dillberg--he marked that right well."

"Ay, and what was that?" asked the Count.

"Why, I told him how that same Martin came to me, and, upon promise of a share of the booty, warned me of the passage of those Italian merchants. Faith! they came sooner than he expected; for he said, some three weeks hence. But I kept a sharp watch, for fear of accidents, and an unlucky watch it has turned out: for Count Frederick has got all the money, and the castle to boot."

The Count mused for a few moments, with his arms crossed upon his chest, and then replied, "Well, we shall see. Leave the youth to me; I promise that he shall suffer nothing on your account. The money you shall have, and freedom too, if you can give me such a pledge as I can depend upon."

"I can give you nought else than my oath, Sir Count," answered the Baron, stoutly, "You have taken all else from me. The pig has nothing but the pig's skin."

"Well, you shall swear," answered the other; "but yet I would fain have some other bond than air."

"Give me your dagger," said the Baron. "I will swear on the cross thereof."

But the Count of Ehrenstein was too wary to trust a weapon in the hand of a foe. "No," he said, "I will have you swear on a holy relic I have in the chapel, and by the mass.--But you can write, I think?"

"I can make something which they tell me is my name," answered the Baron of Eppenfeld, who, like an eager chapman, grew in impatience to possess the object of his desire, as he who could grant it seemed to hesitate.

"Well then, you shall sign a paper stating that all the aspersions of my name which, in the heat of passion, you uttered to my retainer, Ferdinand of Altenburg, are false and groundless," said the Count; "that will satisfy me."

"How shall I know what the paper is?" asked the Baron; but immediately afterwards he added, "Well, well, it matters not. You swear that I shall have my liberty, and I will sign."

"I swear it," answered the Count, kissing the cross of his dagger. "Wait, and I will write the paper, which shall be read to you word by word."

"I must needs wait when I cannot get away," replied the prisoner; and when the Count had quitted the chamber, he murmured, "Accursed dog! I will be a match for thee still."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE Count of Ehrenstein retired to his chamber to write, passing the soldiers, whom he had directed to wait at the bottom of the stairs, without speaking to them: he did not signify to them that they might retire; he did not tell them to take food or wine to the captive, though the journey of the morning had been long and fatiguing, and none of the party had broken bread since they marched from Eppenfeld. But the good lord was a keen calculator, and he judged that the men would watch better, the Baron prove more tractable, fasting than well fed. He remained some time alone, writing and destroying what he had written--for he was as difficult to please in his composition as a young lover in his first letter to his mistress. Now he thought that the terms he used were too plain and condemnatory of the Baron's own conduct for him to sign them readily; now they were not fully satisfactory to himself; and he strove so to express himself that the words might imply more than they actually stated in his own favour. At length, however, the work was completed, and calling some one from without, he bade him seek Count Frederick's chaplain, for he was anxious to give the whole proceeding an air of candour and straightforwardness which it did not, in truth, possess.

When the good priest appeared, he said, with an air which, for him who assumed it, was unusually free and unembarrassed, "I wish you, good Father, to carry this paper to the Baron of Eppenfeld, whom you will find confined above, where one of my men will lead you, and to read to him the contents. It seems that to my good follower, Ferdinand of Altenburg, he used foul and calumnious expressions regarding me; and that now, being sorry for having done so, he would fain retract them and make amends. I have put down nearly his own words. If he will sign them, well; if not, do not press him. Pray let him see that I am indifferent to his exculpation or his charges, and hold as little communication with him as possible till my noble friend Count Frederick's return, as I am anxious that aught we may have to say to this notorious culprit should be said by mutual understanding and consent."

The priest took the paper, and promised to observe the directions to the letter; and, after having given him a conductor to the Baron's prison, the Count paced up and down his chamber in gloomy expectation. It seemed to him that his envoy was long; he would fain have gone to listen to what passed between him and the captive; but he did not dare; and at length he cast himself down upon a seat, and taking a book from the shelf, affected to read. Scarcely had he done so, when the chaplain returned; and, though the Count's keen eye fixed upon him with an eager and inquiring glance, it could discover nothing in his countenance but the air of a good honest man who had just transacted a piece of ordinary business.

"There is the paper signed, noble Count," he said; "the poor man expresses himself all hungered, and asks for meat and drink."

"Did he make any difficulty as to signing this?" asked the Count; adding, "I hope you pressed him not."

"There was no need, my son," answered the priest, "he signed it at once, and seemed wondrous meek considering all we have heard of him. All he complained of was thirst and hunger; and, good sooth, he should have food, seeing that he says he has not tasted aught since late last night, and it is three of the clock even now."

"Three!" exclaimed the Count; "is it three? How the time flies!"

"Hasting on towards eternity," replied the priest; "it is well to think of such things."

"It is," answered the Lord of Ehrenstein; "he shall have food. Thanks, Father, for your pains; the poor man shall have food:--I had forgot how rapidly time speeds away from us;--thanks."

As soon as the chaplain was gone, he read the paper over again, and marked well the scrawl which testified the Baron of Eppenfeld's concurrence in the truth of its contents; and then he somewhat regretted that he had not made them stronger in expression, considering the facility with which it had been signed. But after having carefully locked it in a casket, he turned his thoughts to other subjects, only second in importance to that which had just been discussed and settled.

"Now, then, for this strange tale," he said; "I cannot believe it true. He would not dare;--and yet the youth spoke boldly. It may be malice after all: I never saw aught but such reverence as might become one in his station to the daughter of his lord; nor, on her part, aught but kindness--gentle, yet not familiar--such as she shows to all. And yet it is strange she has not come forth to greet her father on his return. She never failed before. Oh, if it be so, my vengeance shall be long remembered in the land;--but no, it is impossible! I will never believe it. This Martin of Dillberg is a proved traitor: the Baron's words condemn him; and he has known that Ferdinand would bring him to the question, and with the common art of half-fledged villany, has taken the poor vantage

ground of the first charge. But it must be inquired into--must be refuted. I will call the youth before me:--nay, I will see her first.--But I will not tax her with it: such accusations often plant in the mind the first seeds of deeds to come. I have known many a guiltless heart made guilty by being once suspected."

With these thoughts--for it is wonderful how often the same reflexions present themselves to the pure and to the corrupt, only their effects upon action are different--he went forth into the corridor, and opened the door of his daughter's apartments. In the ante-chamber the girl Theresa was sitting alone at her embroidery, and the Count asked, "Where is your mistress? How is it she has not been to greet her father on his return?"

"I know not, my good lord," replied the girl, apparently embarrassed by a certain degree of sternness in his tone. "I believe my lady sleeps; I heard her say she had rested ill last night."

"Go call her," said the Count. "Sleeps at midday! she must be ill. We must have some physician."

The maid did not venture to reply, but went in at once to the lady's chamber; and the moment after Adelaide herself came forth. Her fair face was as pale as death, but yet her air was firm, and she seemed to the eye but little agitated. Her step was slow, however, and showed none of the buoyant joys with which, in former times, she sprang to meet her father.

"How now, my child?" said the Count, as soon as he saw her; "what! sleeping at this time of day? You must be ill, Adelaide."

"I slept not, father," she answered at once; "I never sleep by day."

"Then why came you not, as usual, to meet me?" asked the Count. "In what important task have you been busy that you could not give a moment to greet your father on his return from strife?"

"In prayer," she answered, simply.

"In prayer!" he repeated;--"why in prayer at this hour to-day?"

"At this hour and day in every year I am in prayer," she answered; "for it is the hour and day my mother left me."

A deep shade fell upon her father's face: "True--I forgot," he said; "the busy occupation of the last few hours has driven from my mind things I am wont to remember: but now sit down beside me, my dear child. This foolish girl, Theresa, says you rested ill."

"She says true," answered Adelaide, taking the place to which her father pointed; "I slept but little."

"And where did you ramble in your waking thoughts?" asked the Count.

"Far and wide," was her reply; but as she answered, she bent down her head, the colour rose into her cheek, and there was a confession in her whole air which made her father's heart beat quick and fiercely. Nearly in vain he strove to master himself, and in a hurried, yet bitter tone, he said: "Perchance, as far as the chapel in the wood." His daughter remained silent. "And not without a companion," he added. "Base, wretched girl, what have you done? Is this your maiden modesty?--is this your purity and innocence of heart?--are these the lessons that your mother taught you?"

Suddenly Adelaide raised her head, and though with a crimson cheek and brow, she answered, "Yes! Nothing, my lord,--neither deep, true love, nor human persuasion, nor girl-like folly, nor one idle dream of fancy--would have made me do what I have done, had I not been sure that duty--ay, duty even to you, required me to forget all other things, the fears of my weak nature, the habits of my station, all the regards of which I have been ever careful,--my very name and fame, if it must be so, and do as I have done."

"Duty to me!" exclaimed the Count, vehemently. "I thought you wise as well as good. You are a fool, weak girl, and have suffered a treacherous knave to impose upon you by some idle tale:--but he shall dearly rue it. Time for prayer and shrift is all that he shall have 'twixt now and eternity."

"He is my husband," answered Adelaide; "and--"

"Go, make your widow's weeds then," cried her father; "for no husband will you have after to-morrow's dawn."

"Yet, listen," she said, in an imploring tone; "condemn not before you have heard. He is guiltless of having deceived me, if I have been deceived: he told me no false tale, for all he said was that he loved me--and that he does; he pleaded no excuse of duty--"

"Who, then?" demanded her father; "who then, I say? Ah! I can guess right well; that false priest, who has always been the bitterest enemy of me and mine. Is it so, girl?--Answer, is it so?"

"If you mean Father George," replied Adelaide, slowly, "you are right. He bade me tell you the fact, if it became absolutely necessary to do so; but oh, my father! you do him wrong. He is not an enemy to you and yours--far, very far--"

"Out upon you, wretched girl!" exclaimed the Count, growing more and more furious every moment. "I know him but too well; and for what he has done I will have bitter retribution. I will lay his abbey in smoking ruins for his sake; but first he shall see the results of his dark intrigues on those he has attempted to force into high stations. He shall see the blood of his beggar brother's child stain the axe, as he has well deserved--ay, and he shall have notice that if he would ever see his face again it must be ere to-morrow. He may come to shrive him for the block, if he will; but I swear, by all I hold holy! that daring traitor shall never see another sun set than that which has this day arisen."

"Hold, hold, my father!" cried Adelaide; "first, for your daughter's sake; for, did you do the act you threaten, the blow must fall on her, not him alone. Be sure that she would not survive him long. Nay, look not scornful, for it is too true; but, if not for her sake, for your own, pause but three days, both to give your better spirit time to act, and to allow yourself to judge with better knowledge. Oh, pause, my father! Bring not on your head the weight of such a crime; think what men will say of you--think how the eye of God will judge you--think what torture your own heart will inflict--how memory will ever show the spirit of the dead reproaching you, and calling you to judgment--think what it will seem in your own eyes, when passion has passed away, to know that you have murdered in your own stronghold your daughter's husband, and, with the same blow, your own child too."

"Adelaide," said the Count, in a tone less vehement, but more stern, "what I have sworn, I will do. You have chosen your own course, the consequences be on your own head. It is you who slay him, not I; but murder!--no, there shall be no murder. He shall be judged as he deserves, this very night. We have laws and customs amongst us which will touch his case--ay, and your own too, were it needful, but that I am tender of you. However, keep your pleadings for yourself, for you yet may have need of them. As to him, his fate is sealed."

"Be his and mine together," answered Adelaide, raising her head, and gazing at her father mildly but firmly. "Let the same judgment pass on me as on him. Spare not your own child, when she is as guilty, if there be guilt, as he is. With him did I hope to live; with him I am content to die. You cannot, and you shall not, separate us."

"Girl, you will drive me mad!" exclaimed the Count. "Cannot separate you! You shall soon see that. Never shall your eyes behold him again. He dies at dawn to-morrow; and, in the mean time, hence to your chamber. There, as a prisoner, shall you remain till all is over. What further punishment I may inflict, you shall know in time; but think not to escape. Doubtless these women are sharers in your crime, or, at least, aiders of your disobedience;" and he turned a fierce glance on the girl Theresa, who stood pale and trembling near the door.

"Oh no, noble lord!" she exclaimed, casting herself at his knees; "I never dreamt of such a thing--the lady knows right well."

"It shall be inquired into," said the Count. "Hence to your chamber, disobedient child; and I will put you under safer guard than this. But delude yourself with no false hopes; you have seen the last of him whom you call husband, for I will grant him not another hour beyond the rise of sun to-morrow. Hark! there are Count Frederick's trumpets--that suits well. He shall be judged at once. Away, I say! Why linger you? To your chamber--to your chamber; but I will see that it is secure."

With a slow step Adelaide entered her own room, followed by her father. There was before her a little desk for prayer, an open book, a cross, and the picture of a lady very like herself, and, kneeling down, she bent her head upon the book,--it might be to weep, it might be to pray.

The Count's eye rested for an instant on the portrait, and then on his child. His cheek grew very pale, and, with a hasty glance around the room, he retired, securing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Ferdinand of Altenburg would have given much for a good horse, a few words in Adelaide's ear, and a free passage over the drawbridge. They were the only three wishes he would have formed, at that moment, if any good fairy would have granted them, but none of those benignant beings came to his help, and he saw that he must abide his fate, whatever it might be. For a time he bent down his eyes in deep despondency, after seeing what he conceived to be Bertha's figure

turn away from the chapel in the wood; but then, again, he gazed round him, with an anxious glance, looking to the east and to the west, as if in the vague hope of some help appearing.

The hills which stretched in a wavy line from the old ruined castle opposite, beyond the abbey in the valley, till they fell in with the mountains that formed the basin of the Rhine, were clothed, as we have seen, with wood; but yet every here and there the forest trees would break away, and leave a patch of meadow or cultivated ground; and in various other places the different roads that cut direct over the summits of the hills, left a small spot vacant of trees, like the entrance of a garden between two walls. Suddenly, at the point where the road leading towards Eppenfeld crossed the higher ground, the eye of the young gentleman saw something pass rapidly across, as if a band of spearmen were proceeding at a quick pace along the road above. The distance was more than two miles, and he could not be certain that he was right in his conjecture; but at somewhat less than half a mile distant from the spot where he had seen this passing object, and nearer to the castle, a patch of vines, nestling into the bosom of the sheltering wood, exposed the higher road again, and Ferdinand stopped in his walk upon the battlements, and gazed for several minutes till once more the head of a long line of horsemen appeared, with banners and lances, and glittering arms, which caught and reflected a stray gleam of sunshine, that poured through the clouds gathering overhead.

"It is Count Frederick," said the young gentleman to himself. "I am glad of that, for he is kind and noble, and if this charge, whatever it may be, rests alone upon the testimony of Martin of Dillberg, I may shake that if I have a fair hearing."

It is true, that when Ferdinand said, in speaking of the charge, "whatever it may be," a voice from within told him quite plainly what that charge really was; but ere the last horseman of the train had passed across the aperture, he heard the sound of footfalls at the other end of the battlement, and turning in that direction, perceived old Karl von Mosbach and two of the soldiers advancing towards him. Now the character of Mosbach, though there was a general resemblance between all the old ritters of his day, differed considerably from that of Seckendorf. He was less frank and free, and though, perhaps, not so full of the active marauding spirit of his companion, was of a more suspicious and less generous nature. Neither had he ever shown that sort of warm and paternal friendliness for Ferdinand of Altenburg which the other old knight had always displayed towards the youth whom he had seen grow up from boyhood. These circumstances, and a knowledge of the task of watching him, which the Count had assigned to Karl von Mosbach, did not render his approach particularly agreeable to Ferdinand, and the first word of the old knight showed that his errand was as unpleasant as it well could be.

"Come, Master Ferdinand," he said, "you must end your walk. I have the Count's orders to arrest you, and put you in the cell under the little hall."

"What for, Mosbach," asked Ferdinand, anxious to obtain any precise information that he could get.

"Nay, that is no business of mine," replied the old ritter, "you will soon hear from the Count himself, I dare say. My business is to obey his orders, so come along."

Ferdinand felt no disposition to resist, where he knew that resistance would be in vain, and therefore, without further comment, he walked slowly on with Mosbach, followed by the two soldiers, and fearing that the next moment his arms might be taken from him. The old soldier, however, did not seem to think of such a precaution, but contented himself with leading him to the cell, shutting him in, and barring and bolting the door. Ferdinand was now left, if not in utter darkness--for there was one small loophole high up, which afforded air and a slight glimmering of light to the interior--at least in such a degree of obscurity, that for several minutes he could see none of the objects around, and though with his arms crossed upon his chest, and his teeth hard set, he strove vigorously to bear his fate with firmness, if not tranquillity, the gloom of the place seemed to sink into his heart, and overcome for the time all the strongly resisting powers of youth. There was something in his present situation which depressed him much more than the imprisonment he had so lately undergone at Eppenfeld. There he knew right well, indeed, that a few hours might terminate his existence, and now the worst that could befall him was the same fate; but the difference was in the causes which might lead to such an end. At Eppenfeld, he knew that if he died, he died without reproach, in the bold execution of a duty; now, if he fell, it was under a grave and heavy charge, from which, notwithstanding all the assurances he had received from the priest, he could not wholly exculpate himself even to his own heart. He felt that passion had lent too ready an aid to the promises of others, and although he had every confidence in the truth and honesty of him with whom his early years had been spent, yet he could hardly bring himself to believe that Father George had not both deluded and been deluded himself.

As he thus stood and mused, the sound of trumpets was borne from without through the little loophole above, and a momentary gleam of hope, he knew not why, came to cheer his heart. But the sounds of the trumpet soon ceased, the trampling of horses was heard as they crossed the drawbridge, and then many voices in the court-yard, first laughing and talking loud, then growing fewer and fainter, till at length they ceased; and no other sounds arose but the occasional call of one servant to another, or the heavy tramp of a soldier's foot, as he crossed the courts, or threaded the passages. Hope and expectation died away again, and the captive sat himself down to meditate bitterly over the passing away of all those bright dreams we have so lately seen him

indulging. Where was the joy of the night before? Where was the sunshiny aspect of life that love, and youth, and imagination afforded? Where was the glowing future, with its hopes and its ambitions--ambitions, the fiery strength of which was all softened and sweetened by tenderness and love? Where was the ecstasy of gratified affection? Where all the splendid pageantry with which fancy decorates the gratification of every desire to the eager early heart? All, all had passed away--the bubble had burst, the vision had faded, and nothing was left but dark despondency, akin to despair. He could have wept, but then the stubborn heart of man, the touch of the sin which hurled the powers from on high, the pride of hardy resistance, came to his support, and he refrained, closing up the sources of his tears, and strengthening himself in the hardness of resolute endurance.

"No," he thought,--"I will give up such weak regrets; I will think no more of things that only unman me; I will consider how I may best meet this charge--what I am to do, what I am to say; and I can say much in my defence. Who could resist such love as I have felt for her? Who could help feeling that love who was with her as I have been? Then, again, Father George, the guardian of my youth, whose counsel and directions I have ever been taught to follow, he directed, he guided, he counselled me to act as I have acted, even when I myself hesitated and doubted. He authorized me, too, to lay the deed on him, and promised to come forward and support it. The Count may indeed condemn me, may put me to death, but still I shall die without a stain."

The more he thus reasoned, however, the more Ferdinand felt that his own case was a perilous one, that although some excuse might be found for what he had done in the extenuating circumstances over which he pondered, yet that excuse would be but little available to save him from destruction. He knew the Count too well, not to be sure that some victim he would have to assuage his wrath, and that, as against Father George his hand would be powerless, protected as the priest would be sure to be by the arm of the church, the whole weight of his indignation would fall upon him. Thus he thought for some time; but yet, though his considerations were eager and full of interest, they were not sufficient to make the passing of the time seem quick. Hour by hour went by, various sounds succeeded each other in the castle, each marking some particular epoch in the passing of the day, to the ear of one who, like Ferdinand of Altenburg, knew well the stated periods of the daily life within; every moment he expected to be called to judgment and to doom; but still the time fled and no summons came, till darkness covered the face of the earth, and he heard the sound of revelry above. Oh! how dissonant, how painful, how unlike it had ever been before, was the merry voice and the gay laugh, and the cheerful noise of the banquet! He thought it a cruelty in the Count to place him there, a mute and sorrowful ear-witness of happy life, in which he was no more to partake; and bending down his head, he covered his eyes with his hands, but it must have been to shut out the sights that fancy offered, for in the profound gloom around him no other object was to be discerned.

While he thus sat, he suddenly heard a sound, as if of the clanking of an iron chain, and then a voice spoke, apparently close beside him.

"Fear not, youth," it said; "be thy heart bold, be thy words true, be thy faith pure, and fear not!" Ferdinand started up and listened, almost fancying that his imagination had deceived him. The sounds had seemed to come from the opposite side to that on which the door was placed, and they were clear and distinct. It was a voice, too, that he knew not. That of Father George he would have recognised anywhere; but it was not his. The tones were deep and firm, like those of a man; and yet there was a sad and solemn sound in them, which filled Ferdinand's mind with doubt and awe.

"Who is it that speaks?" he said; and instantly the voice answered, "It matters not. It is one who knows. Hast thou not seen enough to make thee believe?"

"I have," answered Ferdinand; "and I do."

But the voice replied not again; and all was silent. The sounds above had by this time changed their character. Laughter had ceased, the merriment and the revel seemed over; and though voices were heard speaking, the tones of some were stern and grave, the tones of another low and apparently suppliant. For many minutes, Ferdinand's ear listened eagerly, as the speakers continued; but then steps were heard coming down the stairs, and through the sort of wide vestibule that separated the cell in which he was confined from the great hall. An instant after, the key was turned in the lock, the bolts were drawn back, and the door opened.

CHAPTER XXV.

While such had been the fate of the lover, what was the situation of Adelaide of Ehrenstein?

She, too, had suffered; but not so deeply as he had. There was something in her heart that supported her; a conscious innocence of purpose; a degree of faith and trust which man seldom, if ever, can attain; a readiness for the worst, whatever it might be; a full assurance that she could not, and that she would not, survive him whom she loved, if death were to be his fate; and a fearlessness of death itself, very different from man's bold daring. In her love there was, as is almost always the case in woman's first early attachment, a great difference from the passion of her lover. It was less of the earth than his; and though Ferdinand's was pure, and true, and bright,—though he would willingly have sacrificed life, and all that life can give, for her sake,—yet hers was purer and holier still. He dreamt of long days of joy and happiness with her, in the midst of the fair scenes and warm blessings of this earth. She might have such visions also, but they were not so vivid, and they went beyond. She thought of happiness eternal with the chosen of her heart—of joy, and peace, and sweet communion with the spirit of her husband, in that union which could know no change, and never see an end. It might be hard to cast off all the tender bonds of mortal affection, to give away the love and bliss we know even for the promises of eternity. She might feel a longing to spend with him the ordinary days of existence here, and to pass with him from the affections of this earth, calmly and peacefully to the brighter fate of the good beyond the tomb. But yet the thought—ever present, ever distinct—that existence here is but a brief portion of an endless being, and that, though the passage may be sharp and full of grief, it leads to compensation and reward hereafter, was sweet and consolatory to her in her sorrow, and gave her strength to endure in contemplation all that might follow.

She had time enough for thought, and for tears, and for prayer; for during the whole evening, from the time that her father left her in anger, till the shades of night crept over the sky, her solitude was only interrupted twice. Once a heavy footfall came to the door, the key was turned, and there was heard a sharp knock. On saying "Come in," the form of a common soldier presented itself, bearing some provisions, and having set his burden down upon the table, he retired without a word, again locking the door behind him. The second time another soldier came, affording admission for a few minutes to the girl, Theresa, who could give her mistress no information, and who was still drowned in tears of apprehension for herself. Adelaide questioned her but little, for she had never much trusted her; and there was an undefined feeling of suspicion in regard to the girl's attachment to her, which she blamed herself for entertaining, yet could not banish. All the girl knew was, that Count Frederick of Leiningen had arrived, and that he and her lord were about to sit down to supper in the smaller hall; that Ferdinand of Altenburg had been arrested, and was confined in one of the dungeons; and that all in the castle were busily talking over the events which had taken place. A bright colour came into Adelaide's cheek as she heard that her own conduct was the subject of discussion amongst her father's followers and his guest's; and very mingled emotions brought tears into her eyes; but she asked no further questions, and gave no orders, although it was for the purpose of rendering her any ordinary service that the girl had been admitted for a short time to her chamber. The soldier who had remained without soon grew impatient, and called to Theresa to come away; and Adelaide once more remained alone while the shadows of gloomy thought came darkening over her mind as those of the evening crept over the sky. She sat and read the holy book before her, pausing every now and then to think, as long as there was any light left. But at length all was darkness; for neither lamp nor taper was brought her, and she passed the hours in meditation, in tears, and in listening to the various sounds that stirred in the castle, till all was silent. Though striving hard to banish painful images, yet fancy would present to her eyes scenes which might be passing very near the spot where she sat, without her knowing them or their results. She pictured to herself the short, brief trial which was all that was likely to be afforded to him she loved; she saw him standing before his judges; she heard them pronounce sentence upon him; she beheld him dragged back to his cell, only to await execution on the following morning, and her heart sank—oh, how sorrowfully it sank!--at the thought that she had no power to help him. Her eyes overflowed with tears again, and, kneeling before the place where the crucifix stood, she once more had recourse to prayer.

All had seemed silent in the castle for near half an hour, but she was still upon her knees, with her head bent down, when her father's well-known step sounded in the neighbouring chamber; and the next instant he entered with a light. Touched, perhaps, a little, he might be, at the sight of his daughter's grief and desolation, but still his frown was not relaxed, and no kindlier feelings shone upon his lip.

"What! have they not brought thee a lamp?" he said, as she rose on his entrance. "Take this, and go to bed and sleep, for thou must rise betimes to-morrow. I came to tell thee thy fate—his is sealed. At early dawn, under the guard of a party of men-at-arms thou goest to Würzburg; there to pass the days of thy widowhood in the convent of the Black Nuns, and to learn, I trust, in penitence and prayer, the duty and obedience of a daughter."

"The days will be few," answered Adelaide, in an absent tone. "Can nothing move you, my father?" she continued. "I ask you not to spare me—I ask you to spare him, to spare yourself; for bitterly, till the last hour of life, will you regret it if you injure him. Nay, hear, my father, for I am as calm as you are—but wait a few hours, give no way to hasty passion, see and hear him who counselled us in what we have done, and judge not till you have heard."

"I have judged," answered the Count, turning away from her; "and others have judged who are moved by no hasty passion. Give me no more words, girl. His doom is fixed, I say. He shall not die till thou art beyond the hills; but yet to-morrow's sun shall not be one hour old before he pays

with his head for the crime he has committed. No words, no words;" and, leaving her the lamp he carried, he retired, and closed the door.

It is with difficulty that a kind and gentle heart realizes in imagination acts of severity and harshness of which it is itself incapable. Though Adelaide had feared, and trembled throughout the day, with vague apprehensions of her father carrying his menaces into effect; though she knew him to be stern and hard; though through life fear had mingled with affection, yet she loved him too well to know him thoroughly; for love has always a power of transfusing, as it were, the life-blood of our own character into the object of our affection; and when she was so gentle, she could not believe that he was so cruel. The words he spoke, however, before he left her, the air and manner in which they were uttered; the deep depression of her mind, from long hours of grief and anxiety; the still and gloomy time of night; all tended to give the vivid semblance of reality to the deed which he announced to her. Could it be possible? she asked herself. Could he really imbrue his hands in the blood of him she loved--of one so kind, so good, so brave, so true? Should she never see him more? Oh, no, no; it was too horrible to think of. It was impossible. Her father would never do it.

But as she thus stood on the same spot where he had left her, gazing earnestly on the ground which she did not see, there was a light knock at the door, and she started, but without replying. The knock was repeated, and she said "Come in."

A low, woman's voice, however, answered, "I cannot, lady, the door is locked. Put down your ear to the keyhole."

Mechanically she did as she was told, asking, "What is it?"

"They have condemned him, lady," said the voice. "I heard them say myself, 'Worthy of death,' and then they hurried him away. I cannot stay for fear some one should come," and a retreating step immediately announced that the speaker had departed.

It was true then--too true. He was judged--he was to die--to die for love of her--to die for an act in which she had taken willing part; which she had not only shared, but encouraged. And did her father expect that she would survive him; that she would see the lover of her youth, the husband of a night, thus perish for her sake? that she would live on in the cold world that he had left? Did he expect her to mingle in its gaieties, to take part in its pageants, to taste its enjoyments, to laugh with the merry, and sing with the light of heart?

"He knows me not," she said; "he knows me not. The blow that takes my husband's life, takes mine also. It was unkindness, I do believe, that brought my mother slowly to her grave, and this cruelty will be more pitiful in bringing me speedily to mine."

Casting herself into a seat, she remained in the same position for more than two hours, with her head drooping forward, her beautiful eyes partly closed, her hands clasped together and fallen upon her knee. Not a motion was to be seen in that fair statue. One might have supposed her sleeping or dead. Sleeping, oh, no; sleep was far, far away. It seemed as if such relief would be banished for ever, and that grief--aye waking--would never know cessation. Dead! She longed to be so; but she knew that long suffering must be first. The lamp flickered at first brightly, showing the exquisite features in their still motionless repose, and the graceful line of each symmetrical limb, as it fell in the dull tranquillity of profound grief. From time to time the ray glittered on a tear--not the quick relief-drop of violent emotion rushing plentiful and fast from the eyes like a summer shower no; but the slow, quiet, trickling tear stealing over the cheek, and pausing here and there, but still swelling over as the fresh supply is wrung from the eye by the slow agony of the heart. They fell unheeded. She knew not that she wept.

Not a word escaped her, not a sound passed from her lips. There was no sigh, no sob, no mark of bitter passion; but there she sat, silent and motionless, absorbed in the contemplation of the dark reality ever present to her mind.

The light of the lamp waxed dim and smoky, as the heavy hours rolled on, but Adelaide sat there still; and in the increasing gloom of the chamber, where the faint rays were absorbed as soon as they touched the dark oak wainscotting, her form, clothed in white garments, seemed like that of a spectre, and all the other objects in the room like the faint unreal phantasms of a confused dream. But who is that who suddenly stands beside her?--An old man in a long grey robe, with sandalled feet, a cowl over his head, and steps so noiseless, that in the terrible apathy of despair she hears them not.

She started up the next instant, gazing wildly at him, and thrusting back the glossy masses of neglected curls from off her marble brow.

"I have come to save you, my dear child," said Father George. "Be quick, cast something over you, and come with me."

The fair girl threw her arms around his neck, and fell upon his bosom, "Ferdinand! Ferdinand!" she murmured. "Save him, Father, save him. Mind not me. I can bear my fate, whatever it is. Oh, save him, save him! They have condemned him to death. If morning dawns, he is lost."

"He is safe, daughter," answered Father George. "Safe, and by this time, I trust, far away. I have left him to those who will not, and who cannot fail."

"Oh, but is it sure?" demanded Adelaide. "Did you see him go? My father's words were dreadful. He would set a sure guard. He would leave no chance. Are you sure that he is safe?"

"As safe as I am," answered Father George, confidently. "The stones of this castle would sooner fall, than one hair of his head under your father's vengeance. Come, my child, come; make no more delay. It is now near daybreak. Take but your mother's picture, and your veil to wrap you in, and come away with speed."

Joy was perhaps more overpowering than grief to Adelaide of Ehrenstein. Her hands trembled, her limbs well nigh refused their office; but yet she hurried her brief preparation as much as might be; and then the monk took her by the hand, and blowing out the lamp, led her on. The door of her chamber was open, though she had not heard it unlocked. The antechamber without was vacant, and the last rays of the sinking moon were streaming through the windows against the wall. Everything in the castle was still as death, and in the wide corridor all was vacant and silent, with the carved figures on the stone seats grinning in the pale reflected light that poured from the sky through the small panes. The feet of both the lady and her guide were noiseless, for her step, like her heart, was lightened; and though she trembled still, she hurried on down the wide staircase, and the narrower flight of steps that led from the lesser hall to the old stone vestibule near the greater hall. At the door of the latter, Father George paused, and knocked thrice; and then whispering, "Fear nothing," he opened the door, and led her in.

There was a light in the hall, streaming from a single lamp at the farther end. It was faint and dim in the vast space; but Adelaide started, drew back, and uttered a low cry of surprise, as she saw how that hall was tenanted. Seated in the great chair of state, at the end, was a tall and lordly looking man, clothed in arms from head to heel, and down either side, ranged in long line, were other forms in armour, some with their swords bare, and some with banners in their hands, which seemed to her terrified eye the same as those which usually hung from the vaulted roof above. Every man had his visor down, and all was profoundly silent; but the stern array daunted the poor girl's heart, and she turned an eager glance to the countenance of her companion.

"Fear not," said Father George, in a low voice; "fear not, only come on quickly," and supporting her shaking steps with his arm, he led her on through that dark avenue towards the door at the farther end. None spoke, none moved, as she passed along nearly to the close of the line; but then the seated figure rose, and bowed his head without a sound. Hurrying her on towards the door, the monk opened it, and led her into the stone passage through which she had before passed. There was a lamp burning on the floor; and quitting his hold of her arm, Father George whispered, "Stay for me one moment," and then returned into the hall.

Turning a timid glance back, Adelaide saw him approach the chair of state and speak for a few moments, in a low voice, to its mailed occupant. He seemed to receive no answer; and then clasping his hands together, in the attitude of vehement entreaty, the old man said aloud, "I beseech, I adjure you! By all that is sacred! In the name of Christ, forbear."

The figure bowed its armed head: and, exclaiming, "Well," Father George turned away, and hurried to her side again.

CHAPTER XXVI.

As soon as Father George had rejoined Adelaide of Ehrenstein, he hurried her rapidly on through the passage, and down the well staircase, towards the vaults; but in pushing back the door which opened into the serfs' burial-place, a sharp gust of wind blew out the lamp, and they were both left in utter darkness.

"I cannot go back for a light," said the priest; "but hold by my gown; and fear not, daughter."

The sights she had seen, however, in that place, and all the awful mementoes of mortality which it contained, recurred at once to the mind of Adelaide, and a chilly shuddering sensation crept over her as she followed Father George, holding his robe with her right hand, and feeling the way with her left. Scarcely had they taken a step, however, when a voice demanded aloud, "Who is it comes hither?"

"It is I," answered the priest, without pausing; "give way to the holy cross." No farther sounds succeeded, except the shriek of a screech-owl, as it flitted past; but the moment after, the outstretched hand of Adelaide came upon something cold, and round, and damp, which she instantly

perceived to be a mouldering human skull, and, drawing her arms suddenly back, the movement was succeeded by a rattling noise, as if a pile of bones had fallen down, one striking upon the other. Then came a loud laugh, and a whispering through the arches, and the poor girl faltered on her way, and drew back.

"Fear not, fear not," said Father George, hurrying her on again. "All depends upon speed; let us lose no time. Where is that other door? It should be here.--There is nothing but the wall. We must have got astray amongst the arches?"

Adelaide's heart sank with fear, and, leaning against the damp stone-work of the vault, she supported herself with difficulty, while the priest felt with his hand in order to discover which way the door lay. Even he seemed puzzled and alarmed, as he proceeded slowly, saying in broken, muttered sentences, "This is very unlucky. It must be this way, surely. Keep close by me, daughter, and hold fast by my robe. It is no jest to lose one's self here. Nay, this is the other wall; we must have gone wrong again. Stay, I must have recourse to other means--do not be alarmed." And, raising his voice, he added, in a loud tone, "Let the chapel door be opened!"

There was a pause, and then a slight rustling sound, and then the creaking of a heavy door upon a rusty hinge, and the moment after, at some distance from them on the left, a faint light, which would not have deserved the name but from the more profound gloom of the vaults, showed where the door was placed.

"Now, quick, quick, my child," said Father George. "Lean upon my arm; there is no need of terror. 'Tis but that I would fain avoid bringing about hasty deeds that can never be recalled. Day must be coming fast, by that light; but we shall yet have time." And, hurrying her through the door into the crypt, he took his way onward toward the arch which led out upon the side of the hill.

No farther obstruction presented itself, no living object was seen, and, hastening after her old guide, Adelaide soon felt the fresh chilly air, which in most countries precedes the dawn of day, breathing cold upon her cheek. Not a streak was yet to be seen in the eastern sky, the light clouds above were untouched with the rays of the coming sun, and the stars were seen peeping through them here and there, but yet there was a silvery greyness mingling with the darkness of the night, and showing plainly that morning was at hand.

"Now, my child, all is safe, I trust," said the priest, as they issued forth. "Take heart, take heart, for you must still walk down to the chapel, I could not have the horses brought up here."

"Is Ferdinand there?" asked Adelaide, anxiously.

"Nay, nay; he's farther than that by this time, I trust," answered Father George; "but you shall soon join him, where there will be more safety for both." Thus saying, he led her on; endeavouring to while away the time, and cheer her spirits, with kindly words and assurances; but Adelaide felt deeply depressed; and neither to feel herself free from the threatened danger, nor to hear the monk's assurances of her husband's safety, could rouse her from the dread and apprehension that still hung upon her.

When they were about half way down the hill, and the twilight had so far increased that they could see the faint outline of the little chapel from a point of the rock, Father George paused, and looked down towards it with a somewhat anxious gaze. "It is very odd," he muttered to himself; "they must have put them on the other side, I suppose, to keep them out of sight;" and with a still quicker step he hurried on down the hill, and soon, with his fair companion, reached the chapel-door.

"Go in, my child, and say an *Ave* and a *Paternoster*," he said, "while I look for the horses round here;" and as he spoke he pulled open the door of the chapel for the lady to go in. He then went quite round the little building, and, returning to the door of the priest's lodging-chamber, shook it, exclaiming, "Brother Geoffrey, brother Geoffrey!" No answer was returned, and, entering the chapel, he said, in a tone of some alarm, though he strove hard to conceal it, "The horses have not come, my child, though they should have been here an hour ago; but you will be quite safe here. Come with me into the cell. You can take some refreshment there while I go and seek them."

"Oh! do not leave me," cried Adelaide; "I shall die with fear, if I am left alone."

"No, no--not so," answered the priest; "I will show you in a moment that you are quite safe;" and, drawing a key from under his gown, he opened the door which led from the little chapel to the lodging-chamber at its side, and entered with the lady.

The cell was quite vacant; but on a shelf at one side stood a bottle of wine and some provisions, which the priest soon placed before Adelaide, and insisted upon her partaking thereof, though appetite she had none. "Now, I will go and see for the horses," he said, as soon as he had made her swallow a morsel, and taste the wine. "But first I must show you--Hark! they are coming, I think. Did you not hear a sound?"

"It is from the other side--it is from the castle," cried Adelaide, starting up in terror; and the monk instantly crossed to a little lancet-shaped window which looked up the hill, saying, at the

same time, in a confident tone, "No fear if it be, my child."

The next instant he turned round, nodded his head significantly, and locked the door into the chapel; then advancing to the spot where his pallet lay, with the crucifix at the head, he put his hand upon one of the large blocks of stone which formed the wall of the building, and pressed against it with no great effort. It instantly gave way, however, rolling back, as a door, upon a strong perpendicular bar of iron run through the angle of the block,^[2] and disclosing the lower steps of a little staircase, to which he motioned his fair companion. "Quick; go in, my child," he said, in a low tone, while the horses' feet came clattering down the hill; and with breathless haste Adelaide darted forward, and ran some way up the steps. Father George followed, pushed back the block of stone, and secured it with a bolt. "Go on, daughter," he said; and, feeling her way up; for the stairs were quite in darkness, she soon came to a door-way leading into the belfry over the little chapel. Father George followed her, and reached the belfry just as two armed horsemen checked their beasts at the door. One of them, springing down, entered the chapel in haste, but returned immediately, exclaiming aloud, "He's not in there; and that door's locked."

"Try the other," cried his companion; and the man who had dismounted going up to the door of the cell, shook it as if he would have forced it off its hinges, exclaiming aloud, "Father George, Father George!"

The good priest smiled, but replied not, and the next moment the man without, exclaiming, with an oath, "I will see if he's within or not," dashed his gauntleted hand through the lower part of the window, which was dim with dust and age, and, holding by the stone-work, looked into the cell.

"There's no one there," he said at length. "Where, in the fiend's name, can the monk be?"

"Gone to the devil, I suppose," answered the other man, "who has got more of his companions than they suspect at the abbey, I fancy. But, at all events, we must go back as fast as may be. The Count won't catch him in a hurry, I should think."

While he had been speaking, his companion remounted, and they rode off together towards the castle.

"Now, my child, you will not be afraid to stay here," said the priest, turning to Adelaide, as soon as the men were gone. "I will not be long ere I am back, and no harm can happen to you."

"I shall have less fear," replied the lady; "but yet I shall be afraid. Day is breaking--how shall I ever escape? But look," she continued, pointing towards the wood, as she stood with her face to the arch over the bell, "there is a horse coming up that path, and another behind."

"Brother Geoffrey at last!" exclaimed Father George. "What can have detained him so long?"

"But it is already day," answered Adelaide, in a desponding tone. "We shall be pursued, and overtaken."

"No fear, daughter; no fear," answered the good priest. "See you not that you go well guarded?" and he pointed to a number of horsemen, habited like the serving brothers of the abbey, who were now coming out of the path which they had been following, into the small open space before the chapel.

"Alas!" said the lady; "what could these good men do against my father's soldiers?"

"There are more who watch for you than you know," said the priest; "and if these were not enough, there are others on the road ready and careful; but each of these, daughter, is equal at any time to a man-at-arms, and not unpractised either. However, I will go with you till you are beyond all danger, and you may be well assured that I will do my best to avoid all risk of strife. Now, come with me, and rely upon my counsels, nor doubt that they will guide you to safety at last, though I warned you from the first that there were dangers and sorrows to be encountered."

While he had been speaking, Adelaide's eye had been resting upon the brake through which the cavalcade was advancing; and at length, to her joy and surprise, she saw a woman's figure appear amongst the rest. Father George remarked the expression of satisfaction that passed over her face; and though she spoke not, he replied to her thoughts, saying, "It is your girl, Bertha: they have thrown a nun's gown over her and a veil, which is not quite right, perhaps; but the end justifies the means."

The good priest's maxim is undoubtedly an immoral one, though Father George, with some small faults, was a moral and conscientious man; but that maxim was, and is, and probably ever will be, a favourite one with the church to which he belonged. Leading Adelaide down, then, and feeling quite secure in the numbers which now surrounded the chapel, he threw open the door of his cell; and--while Bertha, with joy, embraced her fair mistress, asked a thousand questions which there was but little time to answer, and told how she had not dared to return to the castle, but had found protection and shelter in the village beside the Abbey--the monk conversed with a brother of the order who came with the train, and heard the various impediments which had prevented their appearance sooner. Their conversation was short, however, for day had already dawned; and Adelaide was speedily mounted upon a horse, which had been brought thither for

her service, and covered with the habit of a nun, which Bertha carried with her. Father Geoffrey dismounted from the mule he rode to take the place of his brother priest at the chapel; and Father George got into the saddle to lead and direct the party.

By narrow and circuitous paths through the wood, avoiding as far as possible every spot where they could be seen from the walls of the castle, the monk and his companions wound their way round to the stream, taking care to approach it as if they were coming from the side of the abbey. Adelaide, as they went along, conversed for some time with Bertha, in an under tone, turning quickly every now and then to gaze around, as the terrors, which she could not shake off, recurred again and again to her mind. When they approached the river, however, renewed apprehensions for him she loved seemed to take possession of her, from something that Bertha had said; and approaching closer to the side of the priest, she once more inquired, in an eager and anxious tone, "Are you sure he is safe--quite sure?"

"As sure as any one can be of anything in this life, daughter," answered Father George; "of nothing here below can we be perfectly certain. But I myself entertain no doubt."

His words were not as satisfactory to Adelaide as perhaps he expected. She would fain have had him repeat over and over again every assurance he had given of Ferdinand's safety. The strongest, the most positive terms, could hardly have reassured her; and the admission even of a chance of the evil she dreaded, made her heart sink.

As it was absolutely necessary to ford the river, Father George paused at the edge of the meadow before they quitted the covering of the wood, to direct those who followed to make as much speed as possible, after they issued forth, to gain the shelter of the trees opposite. But while he was still speaking, the sound of a trumpet was heard; apparently proceeding from the gates of the castle above. It only served, however, to hasten the good monk's movements; and putting his mule into a quick pace, he led the way to a ford over the stream. The trumpet sounded again, just as they reached the bank and came in full view of the walls. Each naturally turned the head in the direction of the castle; but there an unexpected sight presented itself. The gateway beyond the drawbridge was crowded with men, the figures distinct, though the faces could not be seen: but none seemed mounted for pursuit, and all were apparently occupied with another and more terrible act. On the drawbridge itself were seen three figures: one kneeling, one in the long robes of a priest, standing at some distance, and one, with long bare arms, uplifting a ponderous axe. Just as Adelaide's eyes were turned in that direction, the axe fell upon the neck of the kneeling figure, and a loud, wild shriek burst from her lips. Bertha, who was close beside her, caught her firmly, or she would have fallen headlong into the stream; but the lady's eyes swam faintly for a moment, and then all was darkness and unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

We must now return to other personages in the castle of Ehrenstein; for the ways of life are like the roads through a country, where, though many of them may be close together, events of great importance may be passing on each, totally unknown to those who are travelling along the others, although very probably they may be deeply interested in the occurrences which are taking place so near at hand.

In gay and gallant array, with arms gleaming and trumpets sounding, but at a much quicker pace than he had employed on his first visit to the castle, Count Frederick of Leiningen swept up towards the drawbridge, after having seen the stronghold of the Baron of Eppenfeld irreparably destroyed. His face was somewhat graver than it had been on the former occasion, and his followers remarked that he mused more than was his wont. No one was by his side but his jester, and with him he conversed from time to time; but their conversation seemed to those who watched them, much more sad and serious than might be expected in a brave soldier who had just added new laurels to his wreath, when talking with so merry a companion. Behind them came several of the Count's knights and attendants, and with them Martin of Dillberg, who had encountered them by the way, and, after speaking a few words with his lord, had ridden on to take his usual place in the train. The young man did not seem at all at his ease, however, though nothing of any very great moment had occurred, since his meeting with the Count, to bring gloom upon his brow. His lord had heard what he had to say without comment. He had neither smiled nor frowned upon him, but simply told him to go and take his station. His companions in the train had said little beyond what might give him an account of the fall of Eppenfeld in answer to his questions. But there are slight signs of manner more strongly indicative of the thoughts within than even spoken words; and there was a dryness in the answers of the soldiery, a keeping aloof from him, a want of free communication, which instantly struck Martin of Dillberg as symptoms by no means pleasant. What conclusions he drew thence does not much signify to inquire; but

after he had ridden along with the rest for about half a mile, he reined in his horse, and was turning it towards the rear, when one of the old knights exclaimed, "Holla, youth; keep your place. Whither away so fast?"

"I was but going to have a look at the prisoners," said Martin of Dillberg.

"There are no prisoners," answered the old knight. "They were all sent on with the Count of Ehrenstein; so keep your rank."

Martin of Dillberg was well aware that he was no great favourite amongst his lord's retainers; but there was something marked about their demeanour towards him, on the present occasion, which made him feel that uneasiness which a guilty heart always experiences at the prospect of discovery. He saw, too, that there were keen eyes upon him, and consequently that there was no chance of escape; and thus he was forced to ride on till they reached the gates of Ehrenstein, meditating, with a quick and subtle wit, the plan of his future conduct.

The drawbridge was down; and old Karl von Mosbach, with a number of men-at-arms, ready to receive Count Frederick, stood under the gateway. But the Count of Ehrenstein was not himself present; and his noble guest had dismounted from his horse, and given some orders to his attendants, before the lord of the castle appeared. He apologised in courteous terms, but with a somewhat absent air, on the plea of having been engaged in important business; and his eye, while he was speaking, ran over the followers of his friend, till it rested upon Martin of Dillberg. Just as it did so, one of the soldiers of Count Frederick took the youth by the arm, and whispered something in his ear, which instantly made his face turn deadly pale. "What have I done?" he said, aloud; looking to the Count of Ehrenstein. "I have but given true and just information against a false traitor."

"Nay, my lord," said the Count, addressing his friend; "this good youth has rendered me a service, I pray you, deal not harshly with him."

"He shall be dealt with, noble lord, according to his merits," replied Count Frederick, laying his hand familiarly and good-humouredly upon the other's shoulder, but not in the least betraying any wavering or want of firmness in his tone. "Take him away; and do as I have ordered. We will discuss his affairs more at leisure."

"What a sweet thing it is," said the jester, "to hear the lamb interceding for the wolf; the dove pleading for the kite. One would think that the Lord of Ehrenstein had no value for golden ducats, that he would deal so tenderly with him who well nigh prevented them from reaching his hands; but tender-heartedness is the virtue of great men of all classes; and Heaven, which made me a great fool, made me tender-hearted also. Faith! I could weep to think of so pretty a lad being whipped for just teaching other boys to steal the apples which he had not wit or strength to steal himself."

"What means he, my good lord?" asked the Count of Ehrenstein, turning from the jester to Count Frederick.

"Now, Heaven save me from being a man of wit and letters!" cried the jester; "they have ever so many meanings in their own heads, that they can never tell what another man means."

"He would say, Ehrenstein," answered Count Frederick, "that over that youth, whom they are now leading away, hangs the heaviest of charges; the last of many that have been brought against him. He has had full warning thrice before, and thrice has he had forgiveness. Now he shall have fair hearing, and speedy justice. But, for the present, let us speak of gayer things. We will sit and hear his cause some quiet hour this evening. Eppenfeld will hold no more plunderers. The great tower is down; the walls blasted and riven; and if any wolves henceforth inhabit it, they must walk on four legs, and wear hairy coats. How goes it with your fair daughter? Faith! her summer smile has well nigh warmed my wintry heart into a flame."

"She is ill," replied the Count, abstractedly; and then, after a pause of silent thought, he murmured to himself, "There may be malice in the telling, yet truth in the tale; but what need I more? She has confessed it herself."

"Come, come, my noble friend," said Count Frederick, "do not grieve or be apprehensive; this is some light illness of your fair daughter's; it will soon pass away."

"I fear not," answered the Count. "But come, we will to the hall, and after supper we will have discussion of other things; for I, too, have a cause to try, and a prisoner to judge; and, if I comprehend the words of our friend here rightly, one axe may serve for two."

These were grave and somewhat bitter words; and, in our days of softness and refinement, we cannot well comprehend how such sanguinary thoughts as they expressed could mingle with revelry and merriment; but in those times the case was very different; and if men had suffered themselves to be made sad by dark and cruel purposes, there would have been few cheerful hours in life. We must remember that bloodshed formed a part of their sports. War was not only a profession, but an amusement. The sight of violent death, the habit of encountering it themselves, and the little security that existed against its occurrence at any moment, hardened them to inflict it lightly upon others; and the Count of Ehrenstein strove to throw off the gloom which anger and

a thirst for vengeance, rather than awe at his own sanguinary intentions, had brought upon him, and resumed a gay and cheerful air, as he led Count Frederick to the lesser hall. He spoke of supping speedily, and was giving orders to that effect; but his guest exclaimed, "Nay, though I be hungry enough, in sooth, I must first wash this gunpowder from my face and hands. I have a letter, too, that I would fain write; so that, if it will not spoil your meal, I would deny my hungry stomach for a couple of hours."

It was arranged according to his wish; and, retiring to his apartments, he remained there, less, it would seem, in writing than in conversation. The jester and one of his knights accompanied him. His chaplain was sent for, and then two more of his retainers; and though at the close of the time he had stated, a messenger with a sealed packet was sent off to Hardenberg, yet, sooth to say, the words that the letter contained were but few.

Not long after, he joined his entertainer in the hall, and found him walking up and down between Mosbach and Seckendorf. The latter seemed not well pleased with what was passing; and, as the door opened for Count Frederick, and the old knight saw that his further conversation with his lord would soon be interrupted, he replied hastily to something which had gone before, "Well my lord, well, it is very true what you say; but if you would take my advice, you would wait, and get cool. You may think better of it yet. He is brave and stout-hearted, cool and skilful, and will make as good a man-at-arms as ever lived. He is noble, too; and, with God's blessing and good luck, there is no telling what he may reach to."

"He has reached too high already," answered the Count, gloomily. "We will make his arm shorter;" and he turned to welcome his guest to the hall.

The meal passed in the usual course; and though hungry men will be silent till the first keen edge of appetite is taken off, yet, when sad havoc had been made amongst the huge joints of meat, the capons, the geese, the ducks, which loaded the table, laughter and merriment soon began to spread around; the wine-cup circulated freely; the wine was good, and every one seemed to vie with his fellow in doing justice to it.

"Drink fast, drink fast," said the jester to an old knight who sat near, for the sport is yet to come. "My good lords, I pray you tell me," he continued, "what is the use of taking young men's heads off?"

"To prevent them doing mischief with them, Herr von Narren," answered Count Frederick.

"A bad reason, uncle, a bad reason," answered the jester, "as I will show you upon three propositions. First, because it is not true, as you never think of taking their heads off till the mischief is done; next, because, if you always used that precaution, you would not be able to execute it, as, if all the young men's heads were taken off, there would be no old ones to take them off; next, because it defeats its own object, as, if you take their heads off, they are sure to fall into corruption, and to fall into corruption, the church tells us, is a grievous sin. Marry! we should have fine shaving of our shoulders if the practice was generally carried out. I doubt me much, if it had begun earlier, that most of those sitting here would be nine inches shorter, and much less mischief would have been done in the world. I can understand right well the taking of a cork out of a flask of wine, or the head off a barrel of pickled herrings; but why men should chop off the top story of the soul's house, as the cook does the root of a turnip, I could never divine. Marry! it puzzles me, and I have never yet heard the problem explained."

"Faith! jester," said the Count of Ehrenstein, "it is not in every barrel of pickled herrings that one finds such a fish as thou art."

"Truly not," answered the other; "many things in life come from places whence they are least expected."

His words seemed to throw the Count into deep thought; but the jester, who seemed, after the manner of his class, to have cast a random bolt which had hit hard without his knowing or intending it, rambled on to other subjects, jesting rather sharply with old Seckendorf, who seemed in no humour to be pleased with merriment. In the mean time, Count Frederick addressed some words to his host, which roused the other from his reverie, and they spoke together for several minutes in low tones, till at length the rising of the Count of Ehrenstein gave notice that the banquet was over. The boards were speedily cleared, the tables carried away, and while some sauntered forth to walk upon the battlements, or in the court-yards, in the fresh night air, others were preparing themselves for the usual pastimes of the castle hall. As soon, however, as all vestiges of the meal had been removed, the voice of the Count of Ehrenstein was heard, saying aloud, "Let all men, but knights, leave the hall. This good lord and I have business of moment to transact."

"And jesters, I suppose you mean, noble lords; for they are well fitted to take part in solemn business of high import. What is finer food for them than to see grave men doing foolish things?"

"No, my good friend," answered the Count sternly; "your company is very pleasant, but just now your absence will be pleasanter than your presence." The jester laughed, whispered what seemed a jest to Count Frederick, and left the hall with the rest. While they were trooping out, the Count of Ehrenstein spoke something quickly to his friend, who answered immediately, "No,

no, the other case first. See upon whose evidence the charge rests before you judge him."

"I need no evidence but what I have," replied the Count; "but be it as you will, Leiningen."

Count Frederick nodded; and looking round the hall, in which six gentlemen, bearing knightly rank, were left, besides Mosbach and Seckendorf, and the two lords, he raised his voice, and addressed one of his followers, saying, "Tell them to bring Martin of Dillberg before us, and gather those men together whose names I gave you."

The knights hastened to obey, the two noblemen seated themselves at the higher end of the hall, the others ranged themselves around, and all waited in gloomy silence for the events that were to follow.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

With a pale countenance and feeble limbs, Martin of Dillberg was brought into the presence of the two lords. Imprisonment, even for the short period which he had endured it, had taken from him all the bold confidence which he usually displayed, and which had served not a little, on many occasions, to deliver him from difficult and dangerous circumstances, into which a perverse heart and a subtle and unscrupulous mind had led him. No sooner did he appear, than a dark and terrible change came over the face of Count Frederick of Leiningen. His frank, open, and cheerful countenance had become grave some minutes before; but now a heavy frown gathered on his brow, and a stern, indignant quivering of the upper lip seemed to show that it was with difficulty he refrained from heaping reproaches on the youth's head, rather than treating him as a prisoner before his judge. The young man's courage, already low, sank still farther when he saw the expression of his lord's face, and he turned an eager and imploring look to the Count of Ehrenstein, but found no comfort there.

"Martin of Dillberg, stand forward," said Count Frederick, in a loud tone, "and answer for yourself before the witnesses against you enter. Did you, or did you not, linger behind at Saarbrück, on the pretence that your horse had fallen with you, and injured you severely?"

"And so he did, my noble lord," said the youth, taking a step forward, with his heart somewhat lightened by the first question. "You yourself saw that he fell, and hurt me."

"That he fell, I saw," answered the Count; "that he hurt you, depended only upon your own testimony. But answer again, Whence went you from Saarbrück?"

"To Zweibrücken," answered Martin of Dillberg.

"At what hour did you set out?" demanded his lord.

"Early in the morning, my lord, the day after you went," replied the young man; "and I reached Zweibrücken towards evening."

"A long journey for a hurt man," said Count Frederick. "But let that pass. I must have been in Zweibrücken when you were there; why did you not join me?"

"I knew not of your being there, noble lord," replied the youth. "I lodged at the first little inn I found; and I have heard since you were at the abbey."

"Good," answered the Count. "Whence did you go from Zweibrücken?"

The young man paused and hesitated, but at length he answered, "To Anweiler, my lord."

"In one day?" asked Count Frederick,—"a longer journey still."

"I was stronger that day, Sir," answered Martin of Dillberg; "and bore it well enough."

"Doubtless," said Count Frederick, drily; "but why was it you went to Anweiler at all, leaving the straight road hither?"

"Because I was alone, my lord," answered the youth; "and knew not the way over the hills. They told me, too, that it was dangerous, and I thought the high road less so."

"Then, when left you Anweiler?" inquired Count Frederick. "On the following morning early," was the reply.

"Then, had you made as much speed as before," replied his lord, "you must have reached Ehrenstein before me, for I passed nearly two days at Zweibrücken."

"My horse cast a shoe," said Martin of Dillberg, with a varying countenance; but then a light seemed suddenly to come over it, and he added, "and I lost my way amongst the hills, and could not find it for some time, so that I was obliged to return to Anweiler."

"Where you passed a second night," said Count Frederick. "An excellently well told tale, but it will not serve your purpose, youth. Bring in the witnesses.--First, the good host from Anweiler."

Martin of Dillberg's countenance fell; and a great, burly, grey-haired man was brought in, and placed by his side.

"Now, mine host," said Count Frederick, "repeat what you told me about this good youth, the questions that he asked you, and the way that he took."

"Why, my good lords and noble gentlemen," replied the innkeeper, after looking a moment at Martin of Dillberg, as if to identify him, "there was no great harm in what he said, or in what I said, either. We were talking that night, when he first arrived, over a bottle of good Zeller wine, about the state of the country round, and I said, we should do very well, and be happy enough, and be well contented, for we had a number of good lords round who were kind to us, if it were not for that devil of a Baron of Eppenfeld, who robbed and pillaged wherever he thought fit, and plundered all the merchants that travelled our roads without a safe conduct from him; and then he said,--that is to say, the youth here,--that he should like to see this Baron of Eppenfeld much. I told him he had better not, for he might get himself skinned alive; but he only laughed, and asked the way to the castle--that's Eppenfeld, I mean."

"That was, that I might keep out of the way of the Baron," exclaimed Martin of Dillberg.

"May be," said the host; "but the next morning, before I went away, I left my woman to take the reckoning, and ambled off upon my ass to see how the vines were looking on the hill; and as I was going along the little path amongst the vineyards, just above the road, you know, where you look to Creuzberg, who should I see trotting along below me, at a quick pace, but this good youth here. I don't mean to say he was doing any harm; I know nothing about that; but I know he turned off the road, up the valley towards Eppenfeld. We call it Hell's Mouth, for few go in there that come back again; and if they do, it's in the form of devils."

"It was there I lost my way," cried Martin of Dillberg.

"As to that, I know nothing," said the host; "but you came back that night, and slept at my house, and you were not near so chatty as the night before."

"Enough, enough," said Count Frederick; "we have traced him on the road to Eppenfeld; we shall soon find him at the castle gates, and hear what he did there."

Martin of Dillberg's two hands clasped together, straining tightly upon each other, but he said nothing; and his lord, whose eye was fixed upon him, at length, demanded, "Now, youth, will you confess your crime?"

"I have committed none," said the young man, sullenly.

"Bring in the man we took in the watch-tower," said Count Frederick; and looking to the host, he added, "you may go for the present."

A man was instantly brought in, of a fierce and sullen countenance, who gazed round him as if in some alarm; but Count Frederick soon calmed the sort of savage fear he seemed to feel, saying, "Do not be afraid, no harm is intended you. Now answer truly, did you ever see that youth before?"

"To be sure, I have," answered the man; "I opened the gates for him, some days ago, at Eppenfeld."

"But did not! come to ask the way?" exclaimed Martin of Dillberg. "I adjure you, tell the truth. It can do you no good to ruin me--did I not ask the way?"

"You asked the way to my lord's presence," answered the man gruffly; "that's all you asked; and I showed it to you, as I always did single travellers; for he knew best how to deal with them;" and the man ended with a laugh.

"It is malice," said Martin of Dillberg; "it is malice."

"We shall soon see where the malice lay," said Count Frederick. "My good lord of Ehrenstein, there were men of yours who were present with the youth, your squire, Ferdinand of Altenburg, who heard the message which the Baron of Eppenfeld sent me back. They were freed from the dungeon into which they were thrust, and I pray you let them be called to bear witness of the Baron's words."

The face of the Count of Ehrenstein seemed somewhat discomposed; but a moment's thought

reassured him. "Were it not better," he said, "to bring down the Baron himself, as he is in the castle; he sent a rash message to me also, which he has since formally retracted in writing. Perhaps It may be the same in this case."

Martin of Dillberg looked up with hope; but Count Frederick answered, "No, my good friend, the Baron is my prisoner, and may be supposed to act under my influence. Let Ferdinand of Altenburg be called, if you will, he will speak the truth, and though it seems he is in disfavour with yourself; yet that cannot affect this question."

"He is my enemy," exclaimed Martin of Dillberg. "He will say aught he can to injure me."

"We will see if what he says accords with the evidence of others," answered the Count of Leiningen. "He has had no means of knowing what others say; I pray you have him brought, my lord. But, first, I would have those men examined who were with him, touching the reply the Baron sent to me."

The Count of Ehrenstein had been meditating somewhat deeply; but he saw that if there were danger of suspicions being excited against him by anything that Ferdinand might say, it was a danger that must be encountered sooner or later, and that the recantation of the charge which had been made by the Baron of Eppenfeld was his best security. He would fain have avoided the risk, however, and a knowledge of Ferdinand's character taught him to believe, that whatever peril he might stand in himself, he would confine his replies entirely to the questions addressed to him, which might not be the case with the common soldiers. "Let Ferdinand of Altenburg be brought hither, Mosbach," he said. "His evidence will be sufficient for that link in the chain. But, my good lord, if we are to decide this cause, we must have better proof than what the Baron of Eppenfeld said in a moment of rage. That is quite valueless; he accused me, he accused you, he brought charges against every one; but you have testimony at hand which can be rendered available. I found you in the castle hall, after the fall of Eppenfeld, putting questions to a man, named Fritz of Sambach, I believe, who, I have been told, acted as this great marauder's lieutenant. He brought the charge you are aiming to make good against one of your train, though he could not tell his name. He is here in a chamber hard by, let him be brought in, and see if he identifies the prisoner; and, lest any one should suspect that he is influenced by his captivity, give him his liberty before he speaks; there can be no great object in detaining him, and we cannot be too careful that every point be proved, in a case of this kind."

"So be it," answered Count Frederick. "Let him be brought in, if he is well enough."

"Oh, he can come," answered Seckendorf; "I saw him drink a stoup of wine, an hour or two ago, which would hold any three flasks in the cellar. I will bring him in a minute; but let the youth be seated amongst the rest, that he may have fair play."

"True, true," answered Count Frederick; "thank you, good knight, for that honest thought.--Sit there, Martin of Dillberg. This time you shall have plain justice to the full in every way. See that the guilt on your countenance does not testify too plainly against you."

The young man seated himself as he was told, and in a few minutes Fritz of Sambach was supported into the room by two stout soldiers of the Count of Ehrenstein.

"Well, lords, what is it you want?" said the plunderer, in his usual ready tone. "Here I am, for you to do what you like with me."

"First," said the Lord of Ehrenstein, "we have sent to announce to you that you are free; there is no use of keeping the minor offenders when their chief is in our hands."

"Well, that's civil enough," answered Fritz; "but as you have taken all I had in the world, and scarified my skin pretty handsomely, I trust that, before you send me away, you will cure my wound, fill my belly, and give me a broad piece or two in my purse."

"Nay, nay," said Count Frederick; "your wounds shall be cured, you shall have food enough, too; but as for broad pieces you must get them where you can; you will have none here. And now, being a free man, I have one more question to ask you. You said, before many witnesses, that you got the tidings which led you to plunder the Italian merchants, from one of my people. It was a serious charge, and should not have been advanced lightly."

"Lightly!" cried Fritz; "I said it quite seriously; and it is as true as that I stand here. He came and told the Baron all about their route, and said they had great store of gold with them. He drove his own bargain, too, and then he went and betrayed us, I suspect. But I can tell him, if ever I get well of these cursed wounds, I will cut his throat for him; though he does sit there amongst knights and nobles, as if he had no hand in the affair for which we have all suffered."

"Then do you see him present?" demanded Count Frederick. "If so, advance and touch him."

The man walked somewhat feebly forward, and laid his hand heavily on Martin of Dillberg's shoulder, saying, at the same time, "Here he sits. Ay, do not finger your dagger; I have strength enough left to strangle twenty such as you."

"Enough," said Count Frederick, "enough. Let him go free, have his wounds tended, and when

they are better, let him pass the castle gates at his will. Now, Martin of Dillberg, convicted traitor, stand forth again. My good lord Count, and noble knights here present, you have heard the evidence,—is any more required? Is this young man guilty of base treason to his lord, of the blood that has been shed in this affair, and of taking an active part in the plundering of honest merchants, travelling hither upon the warrant of our safe conduct? Pronounce if he guilty or not, and name the punishment which according to our customs and laws, is awarded to such deeds."

"He is Guilty," said the Count of Ehrenstein; and each voice around repeated the word "Guilty."

"Death is the punishment," said old Seckendorf; "and well does he deserve it. By the cord, if he be a boor; by the axe, if he be noble." Each knight present pronounced the same judgment; and while the awful sounds of his condemnation rang in his ear, Martin of Dillberg stood silent and pale in the midst, with his eyes bent down upon the ground; but when a momentary silence followed, he raised his face, and gazed wildly at the Count of Ehrenstein, exclaiming, "Oh! my lord, will you not save me to prove--"

The Count turned from him, merely replying, "Traitor!" and then, springing forward, the wretched youth cast himself at Count Frederick's feet, crying, "Oh, my lord, my lord, spare me for my father's sake!"

"Thrice have I spared you for your father's sake," said Count Frederick, sternly; "and I will spare you no more. I trusted that mercy might win you to better things, and that kindness and confidence might render you true and honest, but I have discovered nought in you but malice, and falsehood, and treachery; and even for your father's memory it is well that you should die. You have heard your doom. Go hence, and prepare for death."

"Then I will do something worthy of it," cried the young man, starting up quickly, drawing his dagger from the sheath, and aiming a blow at Count Frederick's breast with the quickness of lightning. The Count, however, had time to turn it aside, receiving merely a slight wound in the arm; and the youth was immediately seized by two of the knights, and thrown back upon the pavement. His dagger was then wrenched from him, and he was dragged out of the hall, struggling fiercely with those who held him, just as Ferdinand of Altenburg was brought in from without.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The manner and appearance of Ferdinand of Altenburg afforded a striking and favourable contrast to those of Martin of Dillberg. There were traces of mental suffering indeed, on his face, and there was some anxiety in his eye, as it ran slowly round the circle of those present; but there was nothing like fear. There was no trembling apprehension; neither any appearance of stubbornness; but with an upright head, a straightforward look, and a firm though serious aspect, he confronted those who he knew were to be his judges, and him who was about to be his accuser. The Count of Ehrenstein fixed his eyes sternly upon him; but the young man's countenance did not fall; and his lord remained for some moments in silence, as if considering how he should proceed. At length, however, the Count addressed him directly saying, "Young man, do you confess your crime against your lord? To you I need not explain your fault. It is a high and grievous one, as you are right well aware; and as I know you fearless, and believe you to speak truth, I call upon you to answer, on your honour, whether you be Guilty or Not."

"My lord the Count," replied Ferdinand, "I know no cause why a man should be made to condemn himself; and, on the other hand, if I say that I am not guilty, my saying so will not be considered by you or any one as proof that I am innocent. That you have some charge against me, I know, from your having imprisoned me for some hours; but what that charge is, you have not told me; and it is but fair that I should hear it. Nay, more; it is but just that you yourself should prove my guilt, if I be guilty; that you should bring forward witnesses of any act in which I have offended; that you should confront them with me, me with them; ay, and let me bring forward witnesses, too, to prove my innocence after I am told my crime. I do not know much of the law and custom of the land; but I do know that this is justice."

"It is so," said Count Frederick, with a look of grave approbation.

But the Count of Ehrenstein replied at once, "I have power of executing justice in my own court, according to its customs; and I have but called this noble lord and these good knights to aid me with their counsel, that the law of the case may be sure. There are cases in which the relations of social life are invaded, and of which, to publish the whole facts to the wide world,

would be doubling the injury inflicted. I hold high justice in my own lands; and in my own court will I judge you. But will merely put one simple question to these knights here present; it is this: If the sworn retainer of a baron of the land presumes, in secret and without lawful consent, to marry the daughter of his lord, what is the punishment our customary law awards for that offence?"

"My lord the Count," replied Ferdinand, "this, then, is the charge against me; founded, I suppose, on the testimony of the base youth who has just been taken hence; but as it seems you do not intend to try me now, as to whether I have been guilty of that offence or not, I will keep what I have to say on that score till another time, when I can call witnesses to prove what has been my conduct, and why. As to your question, however, I must say two words before it is answered. First, I am not your vassal, nor your serf, nor what is called your customary man. By birth, I am your peer, as I will prove when need be, and as you well know. Then, as to the only oath I ever took, it was to serve and defend you in your life and goods, at the peril of my head, and I have done so. There is no other oath between us."

"That statement makes a great difference, my good lord," said Count Frederick; "and you must amend your question, I think, unless you can claim this young gentleman *as your vassal*, in which case you can only confiscate his fief; or *as your customary man* or serf, when his head is forfeit."

"I claim him as my customary man by oath, and by bread and wine," said the Count of Ehrenstein, "as the laws of the good king Louis stated; and by the same law it is provided that I shall execute justice upon him in my court, if I have right of high justice in my own lands. The question is, therefore, simply as I stated it,--What is the punishment our customs award to a sworn retainer who marries his lord's daughter without his consent?"

"Undoubtedly, death," replied Count Frederick; "but--"

"Take him away," exclaimed the Count of Ehrenstein, waving his hand to the two soldiers who stood by Ferdinand of Altenburg; and the young man was immediately removed from the hall.

"You must hear me, my good friend," said Count Frederick firmly; "by the words I have uttered, I mean not in any degree to give sentence in this case, or to pronounce upon it in any shape, and I am sure in thus saying all here will go with me. If the oath he took be such as he has stated, he is not your customary man, and you cannot touch his life. A thousand things may affect the question, of which we have no proof, even supposing that he has really done those things with which you seem to charge him. What has been said, therefore, is not by any means a sentence, but merely an answer to a question."

"That question answered," said the Count of Ehrenstein, with a bitter smile, "I will decide all the rest."

"Well," cried old Seckendorf, "I say with Count Frederick. I give no judgment in the matter. We all know--at least, we've all been told--that Ferdinand of Altenburg is of noble birth, and is even now looking up for knighthood. Doubtless, my lord might have married his daughter better; for the youth, I fancy, is as poor as any of us, but that does not make his offence so heinous. As to the law, I know little or nothing; but this I will say, that I do not think he has done anything worthy of death."

The Count of Ehrenstein merely nodded his head in grave but meaning silence; and then, turning to Count Frederick, without answering any of the observations which had been made, he led the conversation to other subjects, asking in a light way, whether he would like to visit his prisoner, the Baron of Eppendorf, that night, or would wait till the following morning.

With a somewhat mortified air, his friend replied, that they had had sufficient of painful tasks for one evening, and turned away to speak to some of his own retainers, while the Count of Ehrenstein whispered a few words to old Karl von Mosbach.

The expression of the old ritter's face, however, was somewhat doubtful and hesitating. He had no great love for Ferdinand of Altenburg, nor indeed for any other young man; for he was one of those who, after having enjoyed selfishly and grossly the pleasures of youth, look back upon them when they have passed away, with that sort of covetous regret, which engenders jealousy of those who have succeeded to joys they can no longer taste, regarding them much as the rich miser regards his heir. He was a prudent and a cautious man, however; and while Seckendorf was disinclined to countenance his lord's vengeance, from better feelings and a more generous heart, Mosbach, without pity or remorse, was restrained by doubts and apprehensions. Whatever it was that the Count said to him, he replied, shrugging his shoulders, "Well, my good lord, you know best; but they are all against it, that's clear, and Count Frederick's a powerful prince, likely to have weight in the Imperial Court."

The Count smiled with his usual bitter expression, and then replied, in the same low tone to which their conversation had been restrained, saying, "I will give way to his vengeance on his follower, Mosbach; and in an hour after, he must give way to mine, for rightly viewed--though he sees it not--his case is no better than my own. But I tell you, Mosbach," he continued, grasping his arm, and shutting his teeth close, "this youth shall not escape me, if I live and rule in Ehrenstein for two days longer."

While this conversation had been taking place between those who were left in the hall, Ferdinand of Altenburg had been taken back to the place of his confinement, by the two soldiers into whose charge he had been given. They led him on civilly and kindly enough, for he was a universal favourite in the castle; and one of the men could not refrain from expressing his sorrow at the situation in which he was placed. "Ah! Herr Ferdinand," he said, "this is a bad business! Would to Heaven you had not been so rash! Love between a young gentleman and lady is all well enough--it's a thing that can't be helped, and is quite natural; but to marry her secretly was as mad a trick as ever I heard."

"It is not proved, my good friend, that I did," replied Ferdinand. "I have had no trial yet."

"Ay, ay, but our lord's trials are short enough, and soon over," answered the soldier. "You remember when he caught William Schæffer in sparing the goods of the fat boor by Simburg, because he was in love with his little daughter--was not he detected, tried, and hanged in less than an hour and a quarter? It's a bad business, I say. However, what we can do to comfort you we will, and will bring you some wine and meat, for you must want it, unless your friends the ghosts have fed you."

"I fear," answered Ferdinand, "they do not deal in such substantial things, my friend. So I shall be glad of any provision you can bring me. But do not you run any risks on my account. It is bad enough to be in such an evil plight one's self, without bringing one's friends into trouble.--But who is that standing at the door of the cell?"

One of the men, who held a lamp, raised it to throw the light farther, and at the same moment Count Frederick's jester came forward, exclaiming in his usual tone, "Ah! friend rat, have you come back so soon? I have been looking at your cage; it is wonderful what a number of rat-traps there are in this world, and what sweet baits the devil uses to lure men in--gold, and arms, and silk, and velvet, and pretty women. Good faith! your bait was one that might well tempt a young rat like you to nibble. I've seen a kingly crown before now in that same devil's trap, and a goodly bait it proved, for it caught three before it was carried off by a more cunning royal rat than the rest; but after all, woman, woman is the most killing bait, and the most common; for which reason our great enemy has strewed them about all over the earth, as men scatter poison to destroy vermin. Poor youth, poor youth!--to be trapped so early. I am sorry for your lack of wit."

"Faith! Herr von Narren," answered Ferdinand, "I have neither wit, will, nor spirit, at present to jest with you. I have to think of death, I fancy, and to prepare for it as best I may."

"Well, Heaven speed you!" said the jester; "and yet that's a sorry wish, too. I should rather say, Heaven delay you! as you are not very willing for the journey, I should think;" and as the young man passed him to enter the cell, he added in a low voice, "I will go and tell your friends the ghosts of your sad case; perhaps they may give you spiritual help."

These words, however, from the lips that spoke them, gave no comfort to Ferdinand of Altenburg, and entering his cell, he asked one of the soldiers to bring him any food that was to be allowed him as speedily as possible, and if he could obtain permission to let him have a light.

"You shall have both, Herr Ferdinand, without permission," answered the man. "I shall ask no questions about it; and as I have no orders, either one way or the other, they can but blame me for a mistake."

For about ten minutes, Ferdinand remained in darkness, after the soldiers left him; but at length his friend reappeared, bringing him a flask of wine, some meat, bread, and a lamp. "I must be quick," he said, as he set them down; "for they've all parted in the hall in bad humour, and old Mosbach is walking about like a she-wolf on a winter's night."

Before he touched the provisions, and as soon as the door was closed, Ferdinand took the lamp, and examined the chamber carefully, to see whence the voice he had heard could have proceeded. It was a large, low-roofed room, directly underneath the lower hall, and supported by two short, strong, stone pillars; but though he walked round every side, looking keenly for any break or flaw in the walls, he could find no doorway but that by which he had entered, no aperture but the loophole which gave it light by day. The voice had seemed, however, to come from the other side of the chamber, and there all was blank stone. Could he have deceived himself? he inquired. Could the strange sights and scenes he had lately witnessed have so far excited his imagination, that a wild fancy could assume all the signs of reality? "No, no," he thought, "that cannot be;" and seating himself on the bench, which served for table also, he drank a cupful of the wine, and ate a small portion of the food. As he did so, the same voice spoke again, saying, "Eat and drink heartily: you will need it."

"Who are you, and what are you?" exclaimed Ferdinand, starting up, and gazing forward towards the corner from which the sounds seemed to come. But at that moment some one tried the door, as if to ascertain that it was fastened securely; and then he could hear voices speaking without, in which he thought he recognised the tones of old Karl von Mosbach and the Count of Ehrenstein.

CHAPTER XXX.

In about a quarter of an hour after Ferdinand of Altenburg had been removed from the hall, Count Frederick of Leiningen retired to his own chamber, and remained there in consultation with several of his retainers, for some time. The Count of Ehrenstein did not continue long in the hall after he was gone. None of the vassals or soldiery ventured to return to the chamber they had been told to quit some time before, and only Karl von Mosbach and old Seckendorf remained with their lord. Towards the latter, however, the Count showed all those signs of angry impatience which he was accustomed to display when any one ventured to cross him in his purposes: not, indeed, by words, for he spoke not to him; but by sidelong glances from under the heavy brow, and every now and then a curled and quivering lip, when his eye fell upon him. At length, after having walked once or twice up and down the hall, he said, "Come with me, Mosbach," and led the way towards the place of Ferdinand's confinement. He there shook the door, to see that it was secure, and then, turning to his companion, he said, "Ere noon to-morrow, Mosbach, he must die."

"It will be better, then, my good lord," replied Mosbach, "to do it quietly where he is, rather than to make a public execution of it."

"Perhaps it may," answered the Count; "and I shall look to you to have it done."

"I must have your order, my noble lord," said Mosbach; "your order under your own hand. Then it shall be done speedily, and no one need know but myself and those who do it, that he is not still living."

"Come to me in an hour," said the Count, "and we will consider how this order is to be given--Whether it were better to call a court of all the vassals, and judge him there, or by my right, as a high justicer--they would condemn him, surely.--Well, we will see;--yet there were times of old when good friends would to their lord a service, and rid him of an offender without such formalities, well knowing that he has the right, and secure not only of his protection, but of his favour and rewards.--Ay, those old times are passing away, I fear.--Well, come to me in an hour;" and wending his way up the staircase, and through the corridor, he proceeded past the apartment of Count Frederick of Leiningen to the small tower in which the Baron of Eppelfeld was confined. Without pausing to think, for his mind was already made up, and his plans arranged, he unlocked the door and went in.

"Thousand Schweren!" exclaimed the Baron; "you are keeping me here a long while, Herr Count. I hope you are not going to play me false. Why, it must be past midnight, and I have had no supper."

"Past midnight!" answered the Count, with a smile; "no, Baron, no; it is not yet eleven, and all the people of the castle are up and stirring. They must sleep sound first, before you can escape; but it is of that I came to speak. Count Frederick is fierce against you, on account of some message you sent him; and he vows he will not rest satisfied till he has you before the Imperial Chamber."

"Why, the dog!" exclaimed the Baron, laughing, "the message I sent was all true. I only told him one of his people had put me like a hound on the track of these merchants; and he did too--a brown-faced, smooth spoken youth, who told me his name was Martin of Dillberg--but that might be a lie. However, if you will keep your word, old Leiningen may fret about the Imperial Chamber, if he will. I shall be far enough before he can catch me--the Imperial Chamber, good lack! that would never do. But how is my flight to be effected? Have you arranged that?"

"It must be without my knowledge or connivance," answered the Count, drily.

The Baron gazed at him for a moment with renewed doubts; but then he answered with a laugh, "Oh, I understand--you are not to be seen in the matter, of course; but you can easily remove the men from the bottom of the stairs, and leave the door unlocked."

"Nothing of the kind, I can assure you," replied the Count. "Count Frederick's men have relieved mine from the guard, and the staircase is impassable."

The Baron swore a huge and heavy German oath, too long and ponderous for any English page, and then, with a bewildered look, asked how he was to get away.

There is a bitter pleasure in giving pain, at least in some men; and perhaps the Count would have prolonged his amusement, had he not been somewhat in haste. "There lies your only chance, Baron," he said, pointing to the window. "You are not too broad in the shoulders to get out."

"Why, you would have me break my neck!" exclaimed the captive; "it is full twenty feet down,

and I fall heavy."

"Not if you have a rope to hold by, I suppose," was his companion's reply. "Now, mark me, my good friend, for I have not much time to spare:--an hour hence, if the castle be then quite quiet, you will find a strong rope let down from the window above,--it has borne one man's weight to-day, and may well bear yours. You have nought to do but fix it tightly to the bar, and then let yourself down. You will find no one on the battlement below; then take the traverse that leads direct to the outer wall, where, if you turn someway to the right, you will find steps that bring you to a little postern; the way thence is level, but narrow, till you reach the angle of the castle chapel. Avoid giddiness, or too much wine, for they are the only enemies you are likely to meet by the way. When you reach the chapel, take the first path down the hill, and there you will find a strong horse tied to a tree, with saddle and bridle. He is a gift, so you may freely take him. There is another gift, which use discreetly till you see better times," and as he spoke he laid down a purse upon the table, which seemed well loaded.

The Baron, with his usual greedy haste, clutched it almost ere it had quitted the Count's grasp, tossed it lightly up, and then caught it in his hand, "Ay, that chinks," he cried; "and as for the rest, I shall be ready at the hour. No fear of my brain turning giddy. I have been accustomed to walk on slippery places. Nevertheless, I should like some supper, for that is a very needful preparation to a long ride. Let me have some better wine, too, than that last; it was as thin and as sour as the juice of an unripe pippin. I don't believe the generous grape had any share in its composition."

"Well, you shall have supper, and good wine," answered the Count; "but be moderate in your meal, and think of the future, my good friend. And so this youth, Martin of Dillberg, came to you, and betrayed the good Italian merchants?"

"Ay, that he did," answered the Baron; "I should never have known aught about it, but for him. Let us not talk, however; time wears, and I am hungry. You shall find me grateful, Count, in the way that may best serve you."

"I reckon on it," said the Count of Ehrenstein; "and so good night, my friend."

Thus saying, he turned and left him, and gave orders at the foot of the stairs that a frugal supper, and one bottle of good wine should be taken to the captive.

As the Count was walking onward towards his own apartments, he was met by the chaplain of Count Frederick of Leiningen, who said, "They are seeking for you, my noble lord. Count Frederick wishes to see you before he retires to rest."

"I will go to him immediately," replied the Count; and with a slow and thoughtful step he sought Count Frederick's room. He found him surrounded by several of those who had been his companions in his expedition in aid of the Knights of St. John, and as soon as the Count of Ehrenstein appeared, his guest rose and advanced to meet him, saying, "Ehrenstein, my noble friend, I wish to make it as clear as possible, that we here present think no just cause has been shown for putting to death your young follower, Ferdinand of Altenburg; and without at all meddling with your right to judge your own people in your own court, which I respect as much as I would my own, I do beseech you not to proceed against him in any way without a fair and open trial; for I do think you may find cause to alter your views regarding him, and to pardon his offence."

"Would I could say the same," replied the Count, "in regard to your follower, Martin of Dillberg; but sorry I am to say that the charge against him is fully confirmed by our prisoner of Eppenfeld."

"He dies at dawn to-morrow," answered Count Frederick; "that is determined. But this case is very different, as you must see. That youth has been thrice pardoned for very grievous offences, and it is now clearly proved, to the satisfaction of every one, that he is a base, deceitful traitor."

"The cases are very different," answered the Count, in a thoughtful and placable tone. "Well, I will consider of what you say. I am not a harsh man, Heaven knows."

"Then, have I your word," asked Count Frederick, "that for this night, at least, he is quite safe?"

"Safety depends upon Heaven's will," answered the Count, with a smile; "but as for my neither saying nor doing aught that can injure him, he shall be safe, since you ask it; but, nevertheless, I beg you to remember, that this shall not prevent me from proceeding against him as I may think fit to-morrow, after I have considered, and spoken with you farther."

"That is all I could desire," answered Count Frederick. "Very many thanks, my friend, and peace be with you for the night."

No sooner had the Count retired, than Count Frederick turned towards the jester and the priest, who stood near, saying, "All is safe, then; and we may make our minds easy for this night."

"As safe as a chain of words can make it, uncle," answered the jester; "but I never yet did find

that the padlock of a promise was not easily picked, even by the weakest straw of an excuse. Go to, uncle; you do not know the unreclaimed hawk you are dealing with. Dungeons are very safe places for transacting secret business, and I should not be very much disposed to trust a callow doveling to the paternal care of a vulture."

"What can be done, then?" asked Count Frederick, "I fear for the fate of both these poor things; and I have promised the lady, too, to befriend her, in case of need."

"As for the girl," replied the jester, "you have an easy task; send down to good Father George of Altenburg, and tell him what has happened; let him know that she is in danger and in durance, and as he has got her into the scrape, let him get her out. As for the youth, I'll tell you what can be done;" and bending down his head, he whispered a word or two in Count Frederick's ear.

"Do as you like, do as you like," exclaimed that Prince; after listening with an eager eye and a knitted brow. "I must have no share in that, my good friend; for I feel myself somewhat bound by the words we have lately spoken. I will do as you suggest, regarding the lady; and, moreover, will watch well. You must act in the other case, as seems best, without my knowledge."

"So be it," answered the jester, laughing and quitting the room; and Count Frederick immediately turned to one of the eldest of his knights, saying, "Speed away down to the priest's, Gierheim; tell him all the story; and say, not a moment is to be lost. Take care to pass the gates quietly, however, and bid the warder-watch to let you in without noise. Here is my signet, as a warrant to him, and you may add a gold crown besides."

The knight took the ring, and hurried away without reply; and the chaplain then addressed his lord, inquiring "What is to be done with this Baron of Eppenfeld, my noble lord? He little thought that I was aught but the chaplain of the Count of Ehrenstein, or he would not have told me all that had passed between them; and if, from any farther conversation, he finds out that he was mistaken, they may change their plans and foil you still."

"All that is provided for already," answered Count Frederick; "he will find his undertaking not so easy as he expects. We must force him to recognise these papers, however; though I should judge that your word would be sufficient."

Some further conversation followed on the same subject; but we must now turn to pursue the course of the nobleman who had quitted them a short time before.

As the Count of Ehrenstein turned away, after bidding his friend adieu, he murmured to himself, "Now, may good luck send that old Karl von Mosbach takes the hint I gave him; but whether he do or not, it shall make no difference. If Frederick of Leiningen holds his resolution, and puts his shrewd follower to death, the same axe shall serve for Ferdinand of Altenburg."

When he reached his chamber, however, he found old Karl von Mosbach waiting for the promised order, and dismissing him with disappointed petulance, the Count paused, and thought for several minutes, and then visited his daughter's chamber, as we have seen. The interview moved him more than he suffered to appear, though it did not shake his resolution; and when he returned to his own chamber, he dismissed the servants who were waiting, and sat down by the table to think. "What is it," he said to himself, "that makes me feel thus regarding this youth? What is it that has always made me feel so strangely? Loving and hating him at the same time, trusting and doubting him, relying upon him yet fearing him. It seems as if nature warned me to beware lest he should work me some great evil. He has done so, and he shall die; then he can do no more; but yet it is marvellous what a reluctance I have to shed his blood--and yet I seem to thirst for it. Am I growing weak and womanly, that my just purposes should thus shake me? It shall be so no more. He dies, and then there is an end of doubts. I will hie me to bed, and not think of it."

Undressing himself in haste, he extinguished the light, and cast himself upon his bed; but his head had scarcely pressed the pillow, when a voice repeated three times, "William of Ehrenstein!"

"What is it? Who calls?" cried the Count, starting up.

"One of the dead," answered the voice. "Know you not the tongue?"

"I do," replied the Count. "It is amongst the sounds of my boyhood. Why call you me?"

"I summon you to judgment," answered the voice. "As you judge, so shall you be judged. In the great hall of the castle, before my chair of state, under the banners of our fathers, in the presence of knights and holy men who shed their blood for the deliverance of Christ's sepulchre, I call you to your judgment. See that you be there, or sentence shall pass against you, which there is no power on the earth, or under the earth, to revoke. Make your peace with Heaven; for you have had your time, and it is passing away."

The large drops of perspiration rolled from the forehead of the Count, and grasping the side of the bed firmly with his hand, as if to give him strength, he asked, "Who shall intercede for me?"

"In Heaven, we have all an Intercessor," answered the voice; "on earth, intercession is vain."

Appear at the judgment-seat as you are called, receive your doom, send for the priest, and prepare."

"Stay, stay, and hear me," cried the Count; but the voice made no answer, and though he spoke again more than once, all remained silent.

Tossing to and fro, the Count of Ehrenstein remained sleepless and agitated throughout the night; at one time he thought he would rise and obey the awful summons he had received, either alone or accompanied by all whom he could gather together, but then again his heart failed him, and the hour passed by without his regaining sufficient courage to dare the result. At length, much to his relief, the glimmering light of dawn began to shine through the window; and, rising, he roused his attendants, and gazed moodily from the casement for several minutes.

"Let two men go down to the chapel in the wood," he said, "and bring up the priest, Father George, instantly. He may be alarmed, so give him every assurance of safety; but bring him by force, if he do not come willingly. These monks," he continued, speaking to himself, as the men went to obey his mandate, "how they encroach upon all their neighbours! Here, not content with lording it over every one around, they must needs plant this chapel within the very lands of Ehrenstein, like an outpost thrown forward by an invading army into an enemy's territory. What fools our ancestors must have been to suffer such things! It is prescription makes them strong-ay, and our own weak hearts.--Judgment! Could it be a dream? How often slumber will cheat us with visions so like reality, that even when they are past, we know not whether they be true or false--and yet I have not slept since."

"My lord, one of the pages of Count Frederick has brought this note," said a servant entering. The Count took it, cut the silk, and read; then calling the boy in, he said, "Be it where Count Frederick pleases; bid him use this castle as if it were his own. Why, boy, how white thy cheek looks. Remember, none need fear but those who betray their lord. So go and give my message to your master.--Ferdinand of Altenburg," he continued, murmuring to himself, "your hour is coming!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

Had the Count of Ehrenstein and old Karl von Mosbach spoken loud and distinctly when they visited the door of Ferdinand's prison, the captive must have heard the pleasant arrangements making for his transmission to another world; for although the door was stout and thick, so as to be itself impervious to any sound, yet the pavement had sunk away from it, or it had shrunk from the pavement, leaving a vacancy of at least two fingers-breadths. But the nature of their conversation was such as to subdue the voice, even though they thought that no one could overhear them, and all that caught Ferdinand's ear was the indistinct murmur of tones which were well known to him. They soon ceased, however, and he heard the sound of slowly retreating steps. After a pause, to insure that they were gone, he raised his voice, and inquired, "Is any friend near?" No reply was made, and though he repeated the question, all remained silent. "Well," he said to himself, "if any one comes to my deliverance, he will doubtless come at the right time; so I will even follow the counsel given, and eat and drink heartily."

The food, the wine and the hopes that had been given him, revived the spirits of the young captive, and his meditations, instead of being continued upon death, and the loss of all he loved and valued, were carried vaguely over a thousand circumstances connected with his situation; the strange events that so frequently interrupted the ordinary course of proceedings in the castle, the special care which seemed so mysteriously taken of himself, and the question of how and when it was all to end. Adelaide, too,--he thought of Adelaide often and deeply; and thrilling, painful apprehensions for her frequently crossed his mind; for though he felt sure that her father's anger would not fall so heavily upon her as upon him, yet he well knew that she would not be suffered to escape without some severity, and he thought that she was less able to bear it than he was. How would she act? he asked himself--what would she say when questioned? But these ideas raised up others, and they again mingled themselves with fresh associations; Adelaide's conduct in the past puzzled him even more than the question of what might be her conduct in the present or the future. What was it, he asked himself, which had caused so great and sudden a change in her demeanour, which had rendered her--so timid and apprehensive in the first dawning of their love--in a moment willing, eager, anxious to unite her fate with his, although no objection seemed removed, no danger lessened. It seemed very strange; and, connected with the sights he had seen, and the words he had heard from beings whose nature and properties were all a matter of doubt and mystery, it led to still deeper thoughts and inquiries--why should spirits thus be suffered to revisit the earth where their mortal career was terminated?--Or rather, was it not very natural, that if judgment did not immediately follow

dissolution, and the souls of the dead were not instantly transferred to endless joy or endless sorrow, they should be allowed to haunt the scenes in which the sins of earth had been perpetrated by the wicked, or the virtues of the good had been exercised, and to witness, mingle with, and take part in the results of their own past deeds, as they affected living men?

Such thoughts whiled away some hours, and, in the mean time, the sounds in the castle ceased one by one, till all became still; but sleep had no power over Ferdinand's eyes, and he was still sitting rapt in meditation, with his back leaning against the stone wall, and his arms crossed upon his chest, when the same voice was heard again, making him instantly start up, "Ferdinand," said the voice, "it is time to go."

"But how can I go?" he demanded, "and where?"

"Hast thou not a key?" demanded the voice; "the master key of all these doors."

"Nay," answered Ferdinand; "I was obliged to give it to another to bear tidings of our fate to the priest."

"Take up the lamp, then," said the voice, "and approach the stone in the middle of the pavement."

The young man did as he was bidden, and beheld a large slab of slate-coloured stone, with some old characters engraved upon it. They were,

Beneath this stone lieth the body of
Wolfgang of Spires,
Who built this Castle from the Foundation to the third story of
the Keep,
In the space of three-and-twenty years,
At the end of which he was called to a Mansion not built with hands.
He rests in peace.

Ferdinand gazed upon it, holding down the lamp, and reading the rude letters with some difficulty, mentally inquiring, as he did so, "What has this to do with me?" But suddenly he thought some wind had made the flame of the lamp quiver, for the letters seemed to shake, and then the stone began to rise slowly in two-thirds of its length, the other third being depressed, as it moved upon a pivot. When at its full height, the wooden rounds of a ladder were perceived, and the voice said, "Descend."

A doubt flashed through Ferdinand's mind, as to whether this might not be a means of consigning him to a nameless and unrecorded death; but it instantly passed away, as all the events which had lately taken place crowded upon his memory; and, without showing any hesitation, he began the descent, carrying the lamp in his hand. As his foot touched the ground below, he gazed around, but all was vacant, and he found himself in a vault or monumental chapel, against the east side of which was placed a stone altar, with mouldering ornaments upon it, and to the north a marble tomb, surmounted by a recumbent figure in a burgomaster's gown, with the face turned to the altar, and the right hand holding a mason's rule. Opposite to the altar, on the west, was an old wooden door, partly open, and in a state of complete decay, and as the young gentleman turned towards it, the voice said, "Go forward." Still obeying implicitly, Ferdinand of Altenburg advanced, and pushed open the door. Before him was a long passage, and as he walked on he heard a sound of clanging steps, as of men walking over a stone pavement, in arms. There was no door to the right or left, and nothing to be seen but cold walls of rudely finished masonry, except as he approached the end, where a flight of stone steps led upwards as if into the castle again. Ferdinand hesitated for a moment at the foot; but then, as he had been told to advance, and there was no other way of doing so, he proceeded till he had numbered thirty steps, and then found himself at the end of a narrow passage, leading to the right. On his left hand was a row of small fretted arches, filled up with stone; but on the other hand, where the same decoration appeared, though the lower part was closed with masonry, the fanciful stonework in the point of each lancet arch was left clear, as if to give air to the sort of gallery in which he stood, and a faint light shone through the apertures from some chamber beyond. There was a sound, too, rose up, as if he was raised high above a chamber full of people, and approaching one of the arches, with natural curiosity, the young fugitive looked through. He then discovered that he was in a gallery at the end of the great old hall, but raised as high as the capitals of the columns, and below him a strange sight presented itself by the faint light which reigned in the hall. It was somewhat different from that which Adelaide beheld; for, although there was the same range of armed forms, stretching in line towards the great door at the other end, the chair of state was vacant. No motion was observed in the figures underneath: each stood in his arms like a statue, but yet there was a faint murmur, as if they spoke in low tones, and Ferdinand felt tempted almost to pause, and see what would follow. Ere he had done more than take one hasty glance around, however, a voice, seemingly close to his ear, said, "Enough! go on;" and obeying, as he had done before, he advanced along the gallery to the end. There was no possibility of mistaking his way; for, with a sharp turn to the left, the passage led to the top of another flight of stone steps, down which he went, and suddenly found himself close to the top of the well-staircase, which he had descended more than once before, but on the other side. His way

was now clear before him, and entering the serfs' burial-vault, he hurried on, pausing not for a moment to look at the various ghastly objects it contained, till he reached the door leading to the crypt of the chapel. Going in amongst the wilderness of tombs and monuments within, he hastened forward towards the door at the other end, when a voice suddenly called to him,

"Ferdinand of Altenburg! gay bridegroom, whither away?" and a long, wild laugh rang through the pillared arches.

He started, and turned round. The sounds appeared to come from an old tomb, on which stood a figure in chain mail. The right hand extended, seemed pointing at him with its truncheon; and Ferdinand fancied that he saw it move; but though he advanced straight towards it, the figure remained still and motionless, and on touching it he felt that it was marble. Raising the lamp above his head, till the flame almost touched the arch that sprang from the short pillar at his side, he gazed forward into the gloom, but nothing was apparent; and the instant after, the flame was suddenly blown out, and he felt himself grasped by a strong hand on either side. He strove to free himself by a quick, sharp struggle; but in vain. The two hands held him as if the fingers had been of iron, and a superstitious awe, mingling with apprehensions of a more tangible character, perhaps, deprived him of some of his strength and agility. Not a word was spoken while he strove in that vice-like grasp, and even when he desisted from his useless efforts, all remained dull and silent. There seemed something very terrible to his fancy in being thus fixed, as it were by a power that he could not resist, to one spot, in darkness and in silence. "In the name of Heaven!" he exclaimed at length, "who are you?"

"We are friendly," said a voice, "to you, and to your race, if we are foes to all other earthly beings. Come, and come quietly, for we will guide you to safety;" and at the same time the hands that held him forced him gently forward, through parts of the vault he had never explored. They went slowly, and well they might, for everything before them was as dark as the pit of Acheron; but yet they seemed never to miss their way, and as they advanced, no halt, no stumble took place; no sound of footfall upon the damp earth of the vault was heard. It seemed long to Ferdinand, though perhaps the time that passed was really not more than five minutes, ere a sudden pause was made, and a door opened, for he could feel the free air blow upon his face, and a pale light began to shine under the arches where he stood. The next instant something like a large mantle was thrown over him, and the hood drawn far down upon his face; and then, still held fast by either arm, he was hurried forth into the open air. He thought he crossed a court of the castle, and then went through another arched passage, but he could not see, for the night was dark, and the cowl over his eyes. But then, again, he felt that he was passing through the wood, for the ground became rough and uneven, the wind rattled through the leaves, and every now and then a thin branch struck him as he passed. Rapidly down the side of the hill they went upon their way; and now he could hear the footfall of several others besides his own; at length, however, they stopped again, and a wild neigh just before them gave notice that a horse was near at hand. The voice which had before spoken, now said aloud, "Watch, and be ready," and all remained silent for nearly half an hour.

Ferdinand would fain have questioned those who held him in their hands, but at the first word he uttered, the voice replied, in a low, stern tone, "Peace, if you would live!" In two or three minutes after, a rapid step was heard; and then a voice, which seemed to Ferdinand very like the rough and inharmonious tongue of the Baron of Eppelfeld, exclaimed, "Ay, here's the horse. He has kept his word;" but then, again, the voice which had spoken before, exclaimed, "Now!" There was a sound of rushing through the trees, a brief struggle, a few smothered curses, and then the words. "Bring him along!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

Feeble and faint, with every nerve unstrung, with a swimming brain and a heavy heart, Adelaide of Ehrenstein unclosed her eyes after a long period of unconsciousness--how long she knew not; but it was evident that a considerable time must have passed since thought had left her, for she was now in a small room with an arched, stone roof, and a long pointed window. The sole furniture it contained was a stool, a table bearing a crucifix and a closed book, and the pallet on which she lay. "Where am I?" she asked herself, as her mind still wandered wildly over the past; and for an instant the impression was--for it cannot be called thought--that her father had executed his threat, and sent her to the convent of the Black Nuns at Würzburg. The next moment, however, recollection returned more fully; her flight from the castle; her stay at the chapel; her journey through the wood, and then the horrible sight she had witnessed on the drawbridge, all flashed back upon memory, and with a sudden cry, as if of pain, she pressed her hand upon her eyes.

But Adelaide was not alone, as she thought; and the movement that she made showed those who watched her that she had revived. Instantly the well-known voice of Father George, low, but still rich and clear, said in her ear, "You are deluding yourself, my child. You are grieving without cause. He is safe and well, and far from the castle."

Adelaide started up and gazed at him with a look of doubt, mingled with reproach. Then shaking her head sadly, she burst into tears, saying, "I saw--I saw but too well! Why try to deceive me?"

"Nay daughter, I deceive you not," answered the monk, gravely; "'tis you deceive yourself. Think you that in these dark times the axe can fall on none other but him you love?"

"It is true, indeed, lady," said the voice of Bertha. "It was not your husband. It was Martin of Dillberg whom they put to death. I spoke with the lay brother, myself, who brought the news."

Adelaide clasped her hands together, and looked up to heaven, with reviving hope in her eyes; but then, bending down her head again, she murmured to herself, "Now, God forgive me that I should so rejoice. There must have been some who loved him, too,--some whose heart must now be as cold as mine was."

"But few," answered the monk; "he perished well meriting his fate; and we may reasonably rejoice that the innocent have not suffered instead of the guilty. Take heart, then, my child; for this illness of yours has already been most unfortunate, and I must go to see how the evil can be remedied."

"But is it true, is it quite true, Father?" said Adelaide, grasping his robe. "He is safe? Oh, assure me of it! Nay, look not stern, good Father: you know not how the heart that loves as mine does doubts all things, fears all things, when there is danger to the beloved. I know what you would say; but when I am ready to suspect the evidence of my own senses, to think that my eyes and ears deceive me, you must have some compassion if I hardly can believe the voice of one whom I venerate."

"I make allowance, my child," said the monk; "but yet you do not reason well of these things. Were he not safe, mine would be another task--to console and to mourn with you. Be assured, then. But now I must leave you; for though he is safe, you are not; and for your safety I must provide."

Thus saying, he left her; and Adelaide again and again questioned Bertha as to the fate of Ferdinand; but all she could learn amounted only to the fact, that a lay brother of the abbey had gone up to Ehrenstein at dawn, and, mingling with the people of the castle, had witnessed the execution of Martin of Dillberg on the drawbridge. But of all sceptics, fear is the foremost; and no sooner was the lady fully convinced that the terrible scene she had witnessed had no reference to her young husband, than immediately new terrors arose. She fancied that the execution of Ferdinand might merely be delayed; that her father might still perpetrate the deed he had threatened; that at that very moment the axe might be raised to smite him; and she argued that her own flight would only render the Count more relentless, if her lover remained behind. As she thus lay and thought, the sound of horses' feet was heard as they passed at no great distance from the cell; and, raising her head, she listened, saying to herself, "Perhaps they bring tidings;" but the sounds continued some time, till at length they died away from the ear. It was evident that horses were going away from, not arriving at, the abbey. Then came the blast of a trumpet from no great distance, and then the murmur of voices, rising and falling, as of people speaking vehemently, but far off. Shortly after, Father George returned, and with him the abbot, whom Adelaide had often seen before; a man far advanced in life, but of a stiff, unbending character.

"How goes it with you, now, daughter?" he said, seating himself on the stool by her side. "I have ordered some poor refreshments to be brought you, that you may pursue your journey with more strength; for I am sorry to say, this is no place of sure refuge. Your father's men are seeking you already, and have been even now at the gates. Luckily, the brother who answered them knew not that you were here, and answered, boldly, 'No;--for which he shall have absolution; but if it be discovered that you are within our walls, we cannot refuse to give you up at the Count's demand; for, although his haughty tone and frequent offences against the church would well warrant, in my poor judgment, a flat refusal, yet we poor monks meet with but little protection; and though we can, thank God! defend ourselves well, in case of need, yet the Imperial Court would leave us with our loss and damage, if we gave even a pretext for his aggression. I have heard his haughty words, however, and his threats to burn the abbey; but he may find its stones a stumbling-block at which he may fall down."

"I am ready to go, when you will, Father," answered Adelaide, turning an anxious look to Father George; "but, if they be searching for me, whither shall I fly?"

"You must wait a while, my child," replied the monk, to whom the words were really addressed, rather than to the abbot. "It is not the intention of our noble and reverend father, the lord abbot here, to send you forth without all care for your security."

"But my good brother," said the abbot, "if these men return--"

"We will send them back with such answer as they deserve," replied the monk, boldly; for

although mild and gentle in manner, and by no means so stern and rigid as the abbot himself, there was, in times of need and danger, that vigour and decision in the character of Father George which always rules weaker and less resolute spirits. At first the abbot, transferred from a distant priory, had struggled against his influence; and Father George had made no apparent effort to maintain it; but gradually, as years went by, and difficulties arose, the superior yielded more and more to one who seemed to yield most to him, and the rule of the mere monk over the present abbot had become more powerful than it had even been with Abbot Waldimer.

After a brief discussion, then, it was agreed that Adelaide should remain at the abbey till the hour of noon, when, with a shrewd calculation of the habits of his countrymen, Father George judged that lord and vassal, leader and follower, would all have occupations of a kind they would not willingly forego. He thought it possible, indeed, that ere that hour a new demand might be made at their gate for the restoration of the lady to her father's power; but he was firm in his purposes, and doubted not so to use his authority in the abbey, as to commit the abbot to a decided refusal, from which, once given, he knew that the old man would not depart. Neither did he fear the result; for the sound of horses' feet, which Adelaide had heard, was but an indication of preparations for defence against any sudden attack; and vassals and retainers were already flocking in to support, with the strong hand, if need should be, a community who were generally kind and gentle masters, if not always safe and pleasant neighbours.

Father George also reckoned a good deal upon the presence of Count Frederick of Leiningen at Ehrenstein, to ward off any immediate collision between the castle and the abbey; for that prince, though vigorous and decided in character, was reverential towards the church, and adverse at all times to violence; and, in the mean time, he took care that from one of those high towers of the building which I have alluded to, as being seen over the trees from the walls of Ehrenstein, a keen watch should be kept upon the gate of the castle, that the brethren might not be attacked unawares. Every five minutes, a messenger came down from the clear-sighted watcher, to convey to the abbot and Father George tidings of all that had been observed; and thus party after party of the followers of the Count of Ehrenstein were reported to have returned to the stronghold, and passed the drawbridge. Father George mused and calculated, till at length, turning suddenly to the abbot, as the clock struck ten, he said, "There cannot now be more than five of the men of Ehrenstein out. It were as well the lady departed at once; she can be guarded by those who brought her hither, and, passing unseen through the woods, will run no risk."

The abbot rubbed his hands slowly together, and then replied, "Good, good, brother George. Far from me to refuse the lady Adelaide refuge and hospitality; but when once she is beyond the walls, then let her proud father bluster if he dare."

"He will not be proud long, my noble lord," replied Father George; "there are reverses preparing for him which he dreams not of; and you may ere long see him humbled at your feet."

"Then will I receive him with fatherly tenderness," said the old man, with a look full of, what he thought, humility; but in which, perhaps, a clearer eye might have discovered no small pride.

Father George, however, hastened at once to the cell in what was called the stranger's lodging, where Adelaide still remained with Bertha; but on his entrance the maid held up her hand, and pointed to her mistress, who, worn out with watching, anxiety, and grief, had fallen into a brief slumber. The beautiful eyes were closed; the long, dark, silken lashes rested on the fair cheek, now pale with weariness and sleep; the head fell gracefully on the shoulder, and the soft white hand dropped over the side of the pallet. It was a lovely sight to look upon; and for a moment Father George paused and gazed, with strange emotions. His heart, bound down by icy chains to a solitary, unsocial life, yearned for a child like that. He asked himself--Is it well for man in any class, in any state, to live alone?--to cut himself off from the dearest, the highest, the holiest associations of our nature? Can he really feel and sympathize with human beings?--Can he retain all the perceptions, all the qualities of the heart and mind with which God first endowed him,--to bless, and to be blessed? Is he, in the full sense of the word, a man, if he do not exercise the rights, and fulfil, the duties, of a man? To extinguish hope and aspiration, to shut out love and affection, to separate ourselves from joy and sorrow, to put an icy bar between our bosoms and every warm feeling of our fellows--is this to live?

But the monk indulged hardly a moment in such thoughts. They flashed across his mind, and were then banished; but they made him feel that he was not a monk at heart; and gently and tenderly waking Adelaide from her slumber, he told her what was proposed for her; adding, in a low tone, "I have certain intelligence that he is safe and free."

The lady rose joyfully, exclaiming, "And shall I see him, then, soon?"

"His steps and thine, my child, are bent in the same path," answered Father George; "and doubtless he will reach the bourne before thee. But we must be speedy. Are you refreshed and ready?"

"Quite, quite," answered Adelaide; "those tidings, dear Father, are better than wine or medicine either. Let us go. Come, Bertha, are you ready?"

"Ay, good lack!" answered the gay girl, who had now somewhat recovered her light spirits; "I

am ready, since it must be so; but yet I am never very willing to exchange a comfortable roof and good provision for the bare road and acorn woods; but let us go, lady. It is as well to do what is to be done with a good grace; and now Heaven send us forty miles from Ehrenstein ere night."

No long time was required to prepare; the nuns' gowns, which had been laid aside on account of the warmth of the day, were soon resumed; the hoods were drawn over the heads of the two girls, and, led by Father George, they went out into the great court of the abbey, where not only a number of monks were walking to and fro, some in meditation, some in busy talk, but a large party of armed men also were seated under an arcade that ran along one side, busily eating and drinking, and laughing with merriment somewhat dissonant to the grave solemnity of the scene.

Father George spoke to none; but walking rapidly across, opened a door under the cloister, and held it wide till Adelaide and Bertha had passed through. Then locking it behind him, he crossed a lesser court, and thence led the two girls into what seemed a wing of the abbey. That there were high towers of Gothic stone-work rising above them, they clearly saw; but after passing along a narrow, vaulted passage, with rich tracery upon the roof and in the windows which flanked it on the left, their guide paused at a low door, covered with iron plates and large-headed nails, or bosses. By the side of the door stood a stone bench or coffer, and on it lay several tapers, not yet lighted, and a lamp already burning. Father George, before he proceeded farther, lighted three of the candles at the lamp, and giving one to each of his companions, he took a key from his girdle, and put it in the lock. He was, as we have described him, a hale, strong old man, but to move that door required the exertion of all his powers; and when at length it was thrown back, it exposed to view the entrance of a dark cavern or passage in the rock, which rose gradually from the back of the building.

"Be not afraid," said the monk to Adelaide; "the horses and men are waiting for you in the wood at the end of this hollow. I feared that from the watch-tower of the castle they might see women's garments flutter, if you went out by any of the gates, and that would instantly raise suspicion. By this road you may pass unseen for miles, till you are beyond all pursuit."

"I fear not, I fear not, holy Father," answered Adelaide; and while Bertha murmured to herself, "But I do, mightily," they went on upon their way.

The cavern--which, though perhaps a part was nature's handiwork, displayed evidently the traces of man's labour also--extended for perhaps three or four hundred yards, and then terminated at another door, beyond which they found the dark woods sweeping round, and a spur of the mountain hiding the spot completely from the valley above which Ehrenstein was situated. Immediately beneath the door by which they issued forth was a slight descent, where broken fragments of rock, tumbled about in all directions, concealed from all but very curious eyes the entrance of the passage to the abbey; and below that again, was a small green area, surrounded by tall trees, in which was collected a number of men and horses.

Adelaide and Bertha were soon mounted, the armed men sprang into the saddle, Father George bestowed his blessing upon the young heiress of Ehrenstein, and the word was given to depart, when Bertha, turning her head, exclaimed, "At least tell us whither we are going to, Father, as you go not with us."

"To Heiligenstein," answered the monk. "There you will find a place prepared for you;" and, approaching Adelaide's side, he added, "I forgot, in all the hurry of this day to tell you, my dear daughter, that till you hear more from me, for your own security and that of him you love, conceal carefully your name and rank; your young husband has been cautioned, but you must not forget to be careful."

"I will not," answered Adelaide; "and indeed it will be joyful to me to repose for a time even as a poor country maiden."

"A maiden!" said Father George with a smile; "nay, you must not forget you are a wife."

The colour rose warm in Adelaide's cheek; and, without reply, she rode on, musing.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The glorious sun and the free air of heaven, the blue arch above, the green fresh world around, the face of man, the sweet human voice, greeted the senses of Martin of Dillberg for the last time. The chaplain of Count Frederick had been with him for some hours; but his voice had made no impression. He would neither confess that he had offended, nor acknowledge the justice of his sentence. Sullen and dogged, though evidently terrified and cowed, he remained either

obstinately silent, or murmured low curses to himself, till he was brought out from his place of imprisonment, and led towards the drawbridge. Glaring round, with eyes at once fearful and fierce, he soon perceived the retainers of Ehrenstein guarding the gates, and the soldiers of Leiningen in possession of the drawbridge; while on the right, at a little distance, stood Count Frederick, with his arms sternly folded on his chest, and surrounded by several of his knights. In front was a large beam of wood, with a tall, powerful man, bare armed, leaning on an axe. The youth shuddered; but with the bitter and malicious spirit still strong in his bosom, which had been his bane through life, he looked round for Ferdinand of Altenburg, who, he doubted not, was to share his fate. He saw him nowhere; but he remarked that the chaplain went up to Count Frederick, on a sign, and that his lord spoke eagerly a few words which he could not hear. They were, "Has he shown contrition? Has he confessed and repented?"

"Alas! no, my good lord," replied the chaplain; "yet it is a pity that one so young--"

"It is," said the Count, musing; "were there a hope--but this is now the third time, and hope is gone. Nevertheless--"

But ere he could conclude the sentence, the voice of Martin of Dillberg was heard exclaiming, bitterly, "I see not the man who is more guilty than I am. Where is that Ferdinand of Altenburg? Let me see him die first; or will you spare him, and murder me?"

An expression of high scorn and indignation came over the face of Count Frederick as he heard those words, and pointing to the criminal, he said, "To the block with him--there is no hope!"

The trumpet sounded; they drew him on, and bade him kneel; but when he saw the axe and the bare-armed executioner, his heart failed him, and he drew back and trembled violently.

"Down, coward!" said an old soldier behind him; but yet even that contemptuous word had not power to goad him to assume a daring that was not really in his breast; and still he held back, and gazed wildly at the instrument of his death. The priest advanced to his side, and whispered some words in his ear--they were words of hope and promise for a world to come; but all the unhappy youth's thoughts were fixed on this life, even at the moment he was quitting it; and he murmured, "I will confess--I will pray for pardon!"

"It is in vain," said the chaplain; "your own words but now, have destroyed you. The Count is gone, and you must die."

Martin of Dillberg looked round; but Count Frederick was no longer there; and at the same moment the hands of some of those who had been his companions, but not his friends--he had no friend amongst them--seized him, and bent him down to the block. Then all withdrew for a few steps, except the priest, who still stood by his side, addressing to his dull unlistening ear the words of holy exhortation. There was a movement in the youth's limbs, as if he would fain have risen again; but then the trumpet sounded again, the heavy axe fell hard upon his neck, and at that one blow, the head, smote off, rolled upon the drawbridge.

The men around were used to sights of blood, to daily peril, and to the image of death; but still there were various feelings amongst them. None murmured, it is true,--all admitted that his fate was just, and that he had been pardoned but too often. Some sternly said, it was a good deed done, and turned away contented; but others felt a sensation of awe, and even of pain, at witnessing the violent death of one so young, though brought about by acts of craft and wickedness beyond his years. Count Frederick remained in his own chamber for some time alone, and in deep meditation; and when at length he came forth, his cheek was pale, and his whole air sad.

He had but taken three steps in the corridor, however, when he was roused from the reverie in which he seemed plunged, by the agitation and bustle which might be observed in the castle. Persons were passing up and down the great stairs; doors were opening and closing; there was a sound of trampling horses in the court-yard, and many voices speaking; but above all rose the tones of the Count of Ehrenstein, apparently in anger. Further on, towards the other end of the wide passage, Count Frederick beheld his own page apparently listening to the mingled din; and so occupied was the boy that he did not perceive his lord had quitted his chamber, till the Count called him to him.

"What is the matter, Albert of Landeck?" asked the nobleman, as the page ran up at his call; "there seems a strange confusion here."

"'Tis, my good lord, that the Lady Adelaide has escaped from the chamber where her father had imprisoned her," answered the boy; "and no one knows how or whither she has gone. The door was still locked, they say, and not a trace of her to be found."

"'Tis a strange place, this castle of Ehrenstein," said Count Frederick, with a smile; "has my noble friend no suspicion of who has aided her flight?"

"I heard him vow but now, that it was the monks from the abbey," answered the boy; "he sent down, an hour ago, it seems, to one Father George, at the chapel we passed yesterday in the wood, requiring his presence to shrive Ferdinand of Altenburg; but no monk was to be found

there; and so he thinks it must have been he who has spirited the lady away."

"I will go down and speak with him," said Count Frederick; and, descending the stairs, he found his host, with heated look, and fiery words, urging his horsemen, who were mounting as rapidly as possible, to more speed.

"Quick, fool, quick!" he cried to one; "will you have never done that buckling of the girth? Away, by the upper road, to Anweiler. They cannot be far. Take the road to the left, as soon as you top the hill, and sweep round through the woods, meeting Mosbach by the blacksmith's forge. You, Seckendorf, with four or five more, to the abbey at once, and demand the lady of the abbot, in her father's name. Tell him, as sure as the sun shines in heaven, I will burn his monkery about his ears, if he conceals her. You, Adolph, track along the stream, letting some of the men dismount and look for the prints of horses' feet. If you can find any, follow them. Quick to the saddle to the saddle; a minute, more or less, may save or ruin all. Ha! my noble friend. This is a sad and terrible thing; my daughter fled, and no clue or tidings of her!"

"And the youth?" inquired Count Frederick; "can he give you no information? He, most likely, has some knowledge of her means of escape. Doubtless, the probable necessity of such a step was calculated on beforehand."

"Ha! in my anxiety I forgot him," cried the Count; "true, true--I will have it from his heart--I will put him to the torture. Go, bring Ferdinand of Altenburg hither to the great hall. We will have him in the great hall, Count Frederick. He feared it not in old times; now he shall have cause to fear."

Thus saying, he led the way, while his friend followed, the party being swelled by the jester, the chaplain, and one or two of Count Frederick's attendants, as they went. What it was that Herr von Narren said to those who followed, the two noblemen did not hear; but just as they reached the door of the great hall, and while the man, to whom the Count had given his orders respecting Ferdinand, was drawing back the bolts on the other side of the vestibule, a loud laugh, in which even the priest joined, though not so vociferously as the rest, struck harshly on the Count of Ehrenstein's ear; and flinging back the door of the hall, he took three steps in. Then, however, he stopped suddenly, and gazed with haggard eyes before, around, above him. Count Frederick also looked with an expression of wonder round the walls; and, in truth, it was a strange sight that presented itself. The banners were all gone; the green bows and chaplets of flowers, wreaths, and coronets, were no longer seen; but on every banner-pole hung a mouldy shroud, and each thick column was covered with a pall.

"In Heaven's name! what is this?" exclaimed Count Frederick; "'tis a strange way of tricking out your hall, Ehrenstein."

"'Tis for the bridal! 'tis for the bridal, uncle!" cried the jester.

"What bridal, fool?" cried the Count of Ehrenstein, fiercely, remembering only the hated union between his daughter and Ferdinand of Altenburg.

"Why, the bridal between the worm and the corpse," answered the jester; "there are few more merry weddings; but what is that on the chair of state? It looks marvellous like a pillow after a man's nose has bled in the night."

Count Frederick advanced with a quick step, and his host followed with a pale cheek. The object which had attracted the jester's notice proved to be a blood-stained coat of arms, cut and torn in many places, and on it lay a strip of parchment inscribed with the words, "Wilhelm, Count of Ehrenstein--summoned--judged--condemned.--Death."

"What is all this, my friend?" asked Count Frederick; "you seem to decorate your hall somewhat strangely."

But as he spoke, there was a hurried step upon the pavement behind; and the man who had been sent to bring Ferdinand before his lord, approached, exclaiming, "He is not there, my lord. The door was fast locked--not a bolt drawn; but he is gone. Food and wine are there, as if he had fared well before he went, but not a trace of him can I find."

"Wise young man," cried the jester, "he walks after supper. 'Tis a wholesome practice, and in his case peculiarly preservative of health. He must have a good physician."

The Count of Ehrenstein folded his arms upon his chest; and gazing on the bystanders, murmured, "I am betrayed." Then turning to the chair again, he fixed his eyes upon the soiled coat of arms, raised the slip of parchment, read it, and threw it down again, turning to his guest and saying, "Who can have done all this? I know nought of it. I deck not my hall with shrouds, nor set free my own prisoners. Who can have done this?"

"Nay, it is very strange!" answered Count Frederick. "It would take a man hours to spread these out. Good faith! I love not the neighbourhood of such dark mysteries,--and the youth gone, too! I wonder if our friend of Eppenfeld is safe; for in truth, my noble friend, your doors seem not the most secure."

"We will send and see," replied the Count of Ehrenstein; but the reader is already aware of what must have been the result of the search. The Baron of Eppenfeld was not to be found; and with a somewhat heavy brow Count Frederick exclaimed, "He must be taken! Alone, on foot, and without money, he cannot go far--he must be taken, Ehrenstein."

"Good faith! my noble friend, I would willingly help you," answered his host; "but I have, as you well know, matters on hand that touch me nearer far; and all the men I can spare must be absent, seeking for this undutiful girl and her perfidious paramour. Doubtless these monks are the movers in all this; and I will burn their abbey about their ears, unless I find her speedily."

"No, no; oh, no!" cried the Count of Leiningen. "No such rash violence, Ehrenstein. You may suspect much, but can prove nought against them."

"I can prove that one of them wedded my daughter to my sworn follower," cried the Count, "secretly, by stealth, and at an unlawful hour. He knew right well what he was doing, and he shall pay the penalty."

"Take counsel, take counsel," exclaimed the jester, "and I will show you a far better way to punish this meddling priest. Force him to marry a wife himself; and he will repent in sack-cloth, I will warrant."

"You have no proof of the fact, as far as I have heard," said Count Frederick, "and you may bring yourself into great danger. But 'tis no affair of mine. I will attach myself to find this Baron of Eppenfeld; and he will lie closer than a hind beside her fawn, or I will find him."

"Perchance, in seeking him, you may find what would be to me a far more precious thing," replied the Count of Ehrenstein; "and I am sure that, in honour and good fellowship, if you should meet with either my rebellious child, or he who has seduced her from obedience to her father, you will send them back to me at once."

Count Frederick mused for an instant without reply, and then said, "Nay, not at once, Ehrenstein. Should they fall into my hands, I would fain give you time to let your wrath subside, and judge the case of Ferdinand of Altenburg more calmly."

"He or I shall die," answered the Count, sternly, interrupting his guest.

"But not without fair and free trial, if I have him in my custody," replied Count Frederick, firmly; "that, at least, I will secure to him. We are all the slaves of our passions, Ehrenstein; and when we find an angry spirit stirring within us, we should take sureties against ourselves. For that reason was it that, in judging the guilty youth who died this morning, I called to my aid as many free and impartial voices as I could find. You do so too. At all events, if I take the youth, you shall have no cause to complain that justice is not done upon him. You shall have every means and every aid to prove the charge, and then to deal with him according to the laws and customs of the land."

"Good faith!" said the jester, "then shall he have hard measure and short time; for the laws are bitter enough, and the customs are expeditious. Thank Heaven! we nobles and jesters are above the laws."

"Not so," answered Count Frederick, while his host stood gloomy beside him, not very well contented with the restricted promise he had received; "there are laws for nobles and even for jesters, Herr von Narren."

"Doubtless, doubtless, uncle," said the other; "I said not that there were not laws for all: I only said that we are above them; and that is true, as I can prove. First, the noble is so high above the law, that, long as is the arm of justice, it can never reach him. Secondly, so far is the law beneath the noble, that every day he tramples it under his feet."

"Too true, I fear," answered his lord. "But hark, Ehrenstein! I hear some of your people returning. Let us see what success they have had. Perchance they have caught the fugitives."

It was soon found, however, that no success had been obtained. The persons whom Count Frederick had heard passing the drawbridge were not of those who had been sent in pursuit of Adelaide; but ere an hour was over, two or three who had visited the abbey came back with the tidings that the monks denied the lady had taken refuge there, but threatened loudly in regard to some violence shown by the Count's men to the windows of the chapel in the wood. The messenger added, that they seemed angry enough about something; for he saw vassals and tenants coming in armed, and horsemen sent out as if to call for further assistance. Other parties returned soon after, but yet no intelligence arrived Of the fair fugitive; and the Count of Ehrenstein mused in silence, perhaps not quite so well contented as he would have wished to appear, that he could not take his measures unnoticed by the eyes of one whose frank and generous spirit, and calmer and more elevated mind, acted as a check upon him. Count Frederick, however, did not, or would not, see that his presence was in any degree a burden. He remained with his host, sometimes musing as he mused, sometimes counselling, sometimes discussing; or busied himself in ordering preparations for the pursuit of the Baron of Eppenfeld, by parties of his own band.

In the mean while, the jester kept close to the side of his lord and the Count of Ehrenstein; but he too seemed buried in deep reveries; and at length the last-named nobleman, as if in a fit of impatience, turned round, exclaiming, "Well, Herr von Narren, what do you meditate so profoundly? It is to find that one wilful girl can baffle so many experienced men?"

"No, good lord," replied the jester, "it is rather to find that so many experienced men have not wit to take the means at hand for catching one truant girl."

"What would you?" cried the Count. "What means have I left untried?"

"There was once an old woman who lost a piece of money," said the jester, "and she looked all day for it in every part of her house, except her own pocket. Now the Lord of Ehrenstein is just like the old woman, for he looks for the lady in every part of the country except his own castle, which is just as good a place for hiding a rich thing as the old woman's pocket."

"By my honour! he says true," exclaimed Count Frederick; "all these three missing ones may even now be within a few yards of us, as far as I have seen any search made."

"I have had all the rooms above stairs well examined," replied the Count of Ehrenstein, thoughtfully; "except, indeed, your own, my noble friend; and there I did not dream that any one could be concealed. The mystery is, how these doors have been opened, the fugitives brought forth, and all made fast again. That there is treachery somewhere, no one can doubt; and those who released them from confinement would doubtless assist them in flight."

"That might not be so easy," replied Count Frederick; "but at all events let us search. There seem chambers and passages enough, here below, to hide a baron's train. It is quite possible they might find their way forth from the chambers where they were confined, and yet not be able to escape from the castle."

"That is a tempting door," said the jester, pointing to that which appeared at the end of the hall near the chair of state. "The youth Ferdinand, when we were sitting here together watching the cold pies, lest the mice should make houses of them, talked familiarly of that door, and of the place beyond."

"Ha!" cried the Count of Ehrenstein, "said he that he had ever been there?"

"Nay, not so," replied the jester, "but he told me that it led to vaults, and to the serfs' burial-place,--very awful vaults, indeed, my noble lord, where nobody would venture; and he hinted how terrible deeds had been done there, which had begotten many ghosts. I am not sure he did not speak of devils too; but he was marvellous conversant with all that the place contained; and his was a bold heart, just fit to trust himself with spirits, good or bad."

"Come," cried the Count hastily, "we will search;" but he led the way from the door which had been the theme of the jester's conversation, and, followed by several attendants, examined carefully every part of the building which had not been searched before, till he came to the door of the great hall again; but there he paused, and seemed unwilling to go farther.

"Let us on, Ehrenstein," said Count Frederick, "and make the work complete by looking through these vaults."

"They are not there," answered the Count, in a hesitating tone; "I feel sure they would not venture."

"What, not Ferdinand of Altenburg!" exclaimed Count Frederick; "I would gage a county against a flask of Ingelheim, that he would venture into an open grave sooner than any man should say he was afraid. I am some judge of men's courage; and few things would daunt that lad. If he knew that other men feared to tread those vaults, 'tis the very reason he would seek refuge there."

The Count of Ehrenstein mused for a moment. There was truth in what his friend said; and he remembered, too, how little dread his daughter had seemed to feel in trusting herself where others were afraid to stay for even a few minutes. There, too, in that very hall, she had been alone for some hours with Ferdinand of Altenburg; and the hope of finding them together in the gloomy asylum beyond, and punishing one at least upon the spot, filled him with a fierce kind of pleasure; but yet he hesitated. "I know not," he said, "but I doubt much, my noble friend, that we shall find anyone to aid the search. All men here dread that place. Even this hall they hold in terror, from their superstitious fancies. Did you not see how, when the messenger came to tell me the answer of these daring monks, he flurried away like lightning as soon as his errand was told?"

"Nay, what matters it how many there be?" asked his guest. "Here are you and I, and our friend Herr von Narren, who, I will answer for it, fears as little as we do."

"Oh, I am quite ready, uncle," cried the jester, "though I fear horribly; but fools are privileged against ghosts; and as your band has no lack of fools, I think I can get three or four others to bear us company, though, doubtless, we shall have rare trembling and shaking as we walk along. There's Henry of Geisen, and his inseparable Fritz Munter; they will go. Here, lads, here! we

want men who love knocking their heads against stone walls. Here is an enterprise worthy of you."

Henry of Geisen was ready to go wherever his lord went, and Fritz Munter would go wherever Henry of Geisen turned his steps. Two or three more were collected, who, though it cannot be said they showed no fear--for every one looked somewhat dull when the vaults were mentioned--did not hang back; and torches being procured, the Count of Ehrenstein, with a heavy brow and teeth hard set, approached the little door on the left of the dais. It was fixed as firm, however, as a piece of the wall, and did not seem to have been opened for years.

"Stay," said the Count, who, having made his mind up to the examination, would not now be disappointed; "I will bring the keys."

When he returned, Count Frederick, who had been looking steadfastly at the pile of dust which time had accumulated before the door, pointed to the ground, saying, "There is a footmark."

"That is mine," cried the jester, setting his broad square cut shoe upon it. "I defy you to match that for a neat, tiny, little foot, in all the castle."

But the very fact of a footmark being so near the door confirmed the Count in his resolution of going on; and after some trouble, for the key was rusty with neglect, the door was opened, and a torch held up to light the way. On the whole party went, along the stone passage, down the well stairs, and then into the vault; but here it seemed as if all the noxious beasts of the place had leagued together to oppose their passage. Hundreds of bats flapped through the air, and, dazzled by the torches, swept close past the faces of the intruders; enormous toads, bloated and slow, crept across the ground; two or three large snakes darted away, hissing and showing their forked tongues; long earth-worms, and hideous orange slugs, wriggled or crawled along the path; and a large mole cricket dashed itself in the eyes of one of the men, making him start back in terror.

Not a word passed the lips of the Count of Ehrenstein; but, instead of going straight forward, he led the way to the left, and made, by a circuitous course, for the side of the crypt under the chapel. Through it, too, he passed rapidly, till he reached the door leading out upon the hill, which he tried, and found fast locked and bolted.

"Now," he cried, "if they are here, we have them safe;" and he then applied himself to make his companions spread out and sweep the whole width of the vaults on the way back, so that the torches might light every part of the space--he himself keeping on the extreme right. But this he found difficult to accomplish: the men loved not to be separated; and only Count Frederick and the jester would take the places assigned to them,--the others keeping close together, and following one or other of the three. The torch-light, too, lost itself in the old darkness of the place, as soon as, having quitted the crypt, where the windows afforded some light, however dim, they entered the wider vaults where the serfs were buried; and often one person stopped, or another, as they went along, examining the various objects that met their eyes. The Count of Ehrenstein himself paused at a door on his right, and looked to ascertain that it was fastened; but he soon resumed his advance again, and had nearly reached the other side, when a voice, loud and commanding, suddenly cried, "Stand!"

Every one started, and there was a dead silence for an instant.

"Who spoke there?" demanded the Count of Ehrenstein. "Leiningen, was it you?"

"Not I," exclaimed Count Frederick. "It seemed to come from your side."

"I heard it on both sides," said the jester; "but that is natural, having two ears."

"Who spoke?" again asked the Count of Ehrenstein, raising his voice; but no one answered, and Count Frederick took a step forward. The next moment he exclaimed, "What, in Heaven's name, is this? Ehrenstein, Ehrenstein, come hither! What is this?"

The men crowded up to the spot where the nobleman stood. The Count of Ehrenstein came more slowly; but when he did come, he found his friend gazing at the skeleton chained to the stone column. That, however, was not the only object that met his eyes; for in the bony hand was a long strip of vellum, falling almost to the ground, and upon it in large characters, written apparently in blood, was the word "Vengeance!"

The Count paused, and gazed with his eyes straining from their sockets, his mouth half open, and his nostrils expanded; while beside him stood Count Frederick, and behind, the jester, with his eyes bent upon his lord's entertainer, his lip quivering, and his brow knit into a dark and ominous frown. All kept silent for some time, and no one moved, unless indeed it was the jester, whose hand opened and shut more than once upon the hilt of his dagger. At length Count Frederick broke the terrible silence, and inquired, "What is this, Ehrenstein?"

The Count made no reply; and in an instant after he fell back, senseless, one of the soldiers catching him just as his head was about to strike the ground.

"Take him up, and carry him to his chamber," cried Count Frederick; "we have had enough of

this;" and two of the men, raising the body of the Count, who sighed heavily, bore him on, while his friend followed, conversing in a low tone with the jester.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"Halt!" cried, at length, the same voice which had more than once sounded in the ear of Ferdinand of Altenburg, during the eventful night of his escape from the castle of Ehrenstein, but now speaking in a louder tone than before; and the hands which still held the arms of the young fugitive somewhat relaxed their grasp. Ferdinand, however, had now a more definite idea of the place to which he had been brought; for during the time they had paused in the wood, and the half hour which had elapsed since they had resumed their rapid course, he had had time to collect his thoughts, which at first were confused with agitation and excitement. As soon as they began to move, he had perceived that they rapidly descended the hill; and shortly after, though the cowl was far over his eyes, he caught the glistening of the river at a few steps' distance. The next minute it became clear that they were passing over the bridge; and then they threaded tortuous ways, narrow and overgrown with briars and weeds, which, he was sure, could only lead to the old castle on the hill opposite to Ehrenstein.

When, at length, the voice cried "Halt!" as I have said, the young gentleman felt sure that they must be standing in one of the grass-grown courts or ruined halls of the dilapidated building. The stamping noise of tethered and impatient horses, too, was heard; and many whisperings, as of a number of men speaking in low tones, sounded around. All was as dark as the pit of Acheron, however; till suddenly a dull red glare found its way even under the cowl; and, a minute after, the same voice said aloud, "Bring him forward; leave the other--he is safe; but bring the last before me."

The hands which were holding Ferdinand but lightly now withdrew entirely, and there was a movement around. He profited by his freedom instantly to raise the hood from his head, and look abroad, when he found himself, as he had supposed, in the great court of the ruined castle; but he was, indeed, surprised to find it half filled with men. Each was cased in armour, like the followers of some feudal baron, and each had the visor of his helmet down, so that no face was visible; but in the midst of the party, seated on a mass of fallen stone-work, with a man holding a lighted torch a little in advance on one side, and another with a large two-handed sword, naked, on the other, was a being of gigantic stature, clothed from head to heel in jet black arms. The gauntlet, the casque, the very plume, were all dark as night; and a strange effect had the light of that single torch, as it showed that towering form, glistened upon the bare weapon, which was the only object that reflected its glare, picked out the black figures all around, and then, as it faded away in the obscurity beyond, faintly illumined the crumbling towers and falling walls of the deserted stronghold.

But, the instant after, a figure was brought forward before the seated leader, which at once arrested all Ferdinand's attention; for at a glance he recognised the Baron of Eppenfeld.

Even now, though the scene and the circumstances were well calculated to strike terror even into a bold and resolute heart, the Baron maintained his air of rude and reckless daring, gazed round the groups in his neighbourhood, fixed his eyes upon the principal figure, looked at the swordsman with his naked weapon, and then, with a laugh, exclaimed, "Well, I am amongst comrades, it seems. We are all of a feather, doubtless, though I knew not there were so many eagles within a day's flight of my own eyry."

"Eagles, kite!" exclaimed the voice of the gigantic figure with the black plume. "You merit plucking for your insolence in comparing a carrion fowl like thyself to noble birds. Listen, Baron of Eppenfeld, and answer before the court of the Black Rider; and mark well all that thou seest, and all that thou hearest. Look at that sword."

"I see it," answered the Baron; "it is long and strong, and in a good hand may do good service."

"The edge is sharp," replied the voice; "and ere half an hour be over that edge shall smite thy neck, if thou answerest not, or answerest untruly, any question that is asked."

"By the Lord! I am in no mood for answering questions," replied the Baron of Eppenfeld, who did not seem to apply the idea of death to himself with any great facility, or who perhaps doubted that the threat held out to him would be put in execution.

But the tone of him who spoke speedily removed all doubts. "Well, then," said the voice, "be it as you say. Kneel down, Baron of Eppenfeld.--Strike off his head,--but, first, smite the spurs from

the heels of the felon!"

Before the Baron could turn round, or had time to say another word, the blow of an axe from some one behind struck away the marks of knighthood from his heels, the sharpest indignity that man could suffer in those days; and, while his heart beat, and his cheek grew red and white, the voice again exclaimed, "Kneel down!"

"Stay, stay," cried the Baron, now convinced that it was no jest they practised on him. "What are your questions?"

"Nay, no covenants," answered the Black Rider. "Here men answer, or do not answer, all that is asked of them. If they answer, well; they are safe from harm--if they answer not, they die. Such is my law. Once more, Wilt thou live or die?"

"Live, to be sure," cried the Baron. "Think you I would die while grapes grow beside the Rhine, or the roe deer bounds upon the mountain? Ask what you will, I will answer."

"Speak without pause or hesitation, then," said the Black Rider. "If he falter but at a word, sweep off his head. Now, mark well! Did the Count of Ehrenstein, some sixteen years ago, send you with your men to seize, near Ulm, a lady and her child?"

"He did," replied the Baron; "but 'tis well nigh seventeen years, I think."

"Did he give you a bond for the payment, in three years, of two thousand ducats for the deed?" asked the voice.

"Ay, did he; and he paid all but two hundred ducats," answered the Baron; "that, he would not pay till I proved that I had done all that he required."

"What more did he require than their mere seizure?" inquired the voice.

The Baron hesitated, and the Black Rider instantly exclaimed, "Strike him on the neck!" The swordsman raised his weapon; but the Baron exclaimed, "Stay, in Heaven's name! I did but think of all the matters. They are long gone."

"What more did he require?" thundered the voice.

"That I should plunge them in the Danube, as if by accident, and let them perish there," replied the Baron.

There was a pause of more than a minute, during which every one remained profoundly silent, and then the Black Rider demanded, "And did you do this deed?"

"No, on my life!" answered the Baron of Eppenfeld. "Nay more, I never intended to do it. I would have seized them, and kept them in some secret place, to bring them forth when the time served. But--"

"Have you the bond?" asked the voice.

"Two days ago, I could have said Yes," was the Baron's answer; "but they have sacked and razed my castle, and all the papers--for there were letters many--have either been taken or burnt."

"Now, speak the truth," said the Black Rider; "Who has the papers?"

"Count Frederick of Leiningen had them," answered the Baron; "but, doubtless, he gave them to his worthy and right noble friend of Ehrenstein."

"What became of the child and the mother?" asked the voice again.

"I cannot tell," replied the captive. "They had received timely notice, it would seem, of my errand, and had fled ere I reached Ulm; but I have heard that both died of the fever at Regensburg, not a year after. It is true, too; for those who told me knew what they said. So I swore to the Count that they were dead; but because I could bring no one to prove that they perished in the Danube, he would not pay the rest, and I kept the bond."

"Who read to you the Count's letters, and wrote your answers," inquired his interrogator; "for you are no clerk yourself?"

"A shaveling--a priest I had with me then," said the Baron. "He had fled to me from Würzburg, where he had killed a man in a fray about a woman; but he is dead now, the good clerk. He drank half a hogshead of red wine in a week, which made him so sleepy he never woke again."

"No more of him," cried the voice sternly. "So the mother and the child died of the fever. Now, speak; Who were they?"

"Nay, that I know not," said the prisoner. "All I know is what the Count told me, which was, that she was his dead brother's leman, and the boy a bastard, whom he did not believe even to be

his brother's child. They wanted money from him, I fancy, on some old written promise of the last count--a thousand Venetian ducats yearly--so he told me; and he thought it best to give me two years of the payment, and have done with it for ever."

"Is this all you know of this matter?" asked the Black Rider again.

"All, upon my life!" answered the Baron. "They are both dead--that is certain; but I had no hand in their death, I will swear upon the holy cross." The gigantic figure remained motionless and silent for more than a minute, then waved his hand from right to left with a peculiar motion. The Baron turned his head, in some doubt whether he should not see the naked sword behind him taking the same direction towards his neck; but suddenly the man who held the torch reversed it, pressed the flaming end upon the ground and the next moment all was darkness.

Ferdinand of Altenburg had listened in silence to all that had passed. There were many parts of this long interrogatory in which he felt a deep interest; but that interest was too keen, too overpowering, to suffer him, even by a word, to interrupt the course of the questions and replies. There was an awe upon him--he knew not well why--that would have kept him silent even had he not been listening eagerly for every syllable. It seemed as if the secret of his life were in the words then spoken. Sentence by sentence associated itself with other things within his knowledge. The scenes of his childhood rose up before him, the flight in the night from a place, the name of which had long passed away from memory, but which instantly connected itself with Ulm, as soon as the word was pronounced. The house at Regensburg, and that name, too, and the death-bed of his mother when he was yet a child, with many another incident, breaking from spots in the past which had before seemed dark, like the sparks of fire wandering about in the half-extinguished tinder, were all brought up vividly before the mind's eye, till at length he was almost tempted to exclaim, "You are wrong. The mother did die, but the boy still lives." He would fain have asked some questions more; and, just as the torch was extinguished, he took a step forward, but instantly a hand was laid upon his arm, not grasping tight as before, but gently; and a voice whispered in his ear, "Not a word; but follow. A horse is ready for you, and we must ride far ere break of day."

Ferdinand scrupled not to obey, for he had been about to act upon impulse; and a moment's thought showed him that it would be better to say nothing. Turning, then, with the person who had spoken, and who still kept his hand lightly upon the young man's arm, he passed through a part of the crowd, every individual in which remained profoundly silent, and paused where the other paused, near the old ruinous gateway, through which the dark masses of the hills and woods around and below could be faintly seen in the dim night air. Suddenly there was a sound of moving feet and horses' hoofs; and man after man passed through the archway, till at length the person beside him said, "Now!" Ferdinand went on, the other followed; and when they issued forth, the young man saw a whole troop mounted, a number of horses held at a little distance, and two standing immediately in front.

"Go on, and mount," said the voice, in the same low tone.

Ferdinand advanced, without further question, and put his foot in the stirrup of the foremost horse. The man who had the bridle in his hand said nothing, and the young gentleman vaulted into the saddle. His companion followed, and they then joined the group before them. Two more horses were next brought forward, other persons mounted, and at length the tall black figure came forth from the arch of the gate, leapt upon a charger a full hand higher than any of the rest, and then riding forward, past all those who were already in the saddle, put himself at the head of the troop. A signal was given from the front, the whole body began to move in exact order, and Ferdinand of Altenburg found himself forming a part of the band of the Black Huntsman.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Adelaide was sad, though the words of the priest had, in some degree, allayed the anxiety she felt for him she loved; but yet she was sad--very sad. There were now other causes of depression weighing down her mind, which during the fever of apprehension she had not experienced. She now felt what it was to quit her father's house, a fugitive--under his anger--under, perhaps, his curse. There might indeed be matter of consolation in her thoughts; there might be a full justification of her conduct to her own heart. She might feel, or might believe, that she had done no wrong. Scanning her motives as severely as she could, she might, with a clear conscience, say, that not for any personal feeling,--not for love, or from weakness, had she neglected a duty to a parent; that passion, or fancy, or attachment, had not shared, even in a degree, in what she had done. Though she loved as deeply as she was loved in return, and owned to her own heart that she had made no sacrifice of aught but the girl's timidity, still it was sad to quit the home of youth

as an outcast. It weighed upon her that her father's last words to her should have been those of anger and bitterness; that the eye which had ever looked beaming upon her, even when it fell cold and harsh on others, should at length have blazed with rage as it rested on her face.

Apprehension, too, mingled with such painful sensations. What if the early discovery of all that had taken place should frustrate the object which had made her willing, eager in her consent? What if her absence, and that of her young husband, in a moment of peril, should leave her father exposed to the dangers from which she would fain have shielded him? Her heart sank as she thought of it; and, moreover, she said to herself, with a sigh--for all women, and most men, think of the world's opinion, more or less--"People will believe that I have yielded to love for Ferdinand to disobey my father on the most vital point, and they will condemn me justly, and think my punishment hardly severe enough."

She felt very sad then: she could take no pleasure in the scenes through which she passed, though the green woods were everywhere pleasant to the eye, and often many a lovely spot peeped in upon her through the sloping chasms in the hills, as she went along. In vain Bertha, with gay talk, strove hard to win her from her heavy thoughts; and though the men who accompanied her were kind and civil in their rude way, yet nought could win a smile to poor Adelaide's lip.

The sun rose high, and looked down into the dells through which they wound along, gilding the banks of moss, and chequering the narrow road with waving filigree work, of yellow light and green shade. He began to sink behind the branches of the higher trees, and a cool, fresh air followed his decline. Through the most unfrequented parts of the wide forest, which stretched far along the hills, they took their way, avoiding village, and hamlet, and farm, and even keeping at a distance from the course of the stream. The paths they chose were those of the woodman; or the hunter; but even the latter trod them so seldom, that more than once, from a thicket close at hand, the wild roe bounded away; and twice or thrice, where a shady glade opened into the heart of the wood, a stag was seen raising his antlered head, and gazing steadfastly at the unwonted sight of a cavalcade crossing his own habitual solitude.

At length, after four hours' slow riding, the man who seemed the leader of the little troop which had been sent to guard Adelaide on her way, drew in his horse, saying, "I think, lady, we must now be beyond all danger, and can well afford to halt for an hour to refresh ourselves and our horses, under the trees, with the provisions which my lord, the Abbot, has bountifully supplied."

"If the horses need refreshment, let us stop," replied Adelaide: "I would not have the poor beasts misused for me; but you need not halt on my account: I do not need any repose, and am only anxious to proceed as fast as may be."

The good man, however, chose to take it for granted that the cattle did want food and rest, though they had fed well at the abbey, and had rested for some hours. Bertha, too, to say the truth, was right glad of some refreshment; for she had had a weary and an apprehensive night; and hers was a light heart, that forgot its fears as soon as danger was no longer very apparent.

Adelaide dismounted, then, as soon as she saw that it needs must be so; and seated on the turf, beneath a spreading beech tree, a plentiful meal was laid out before her, with some of the rich wines of the abbey; of which good cheer her companions failed not to partake more plentifully than she did herself. The horses, tethered near, fed on some oats which had been brought for their need, and finished their meal upon the forest grass; and thus nearly an hour passed without any sign of an intention to move.

The sun where they sat was shining brightly upon a small open space in front, not a cloud seemed to shadow any part of the sky, and the tops of the distant hills, seen through the brake, appeared peculiarly sharp and clear. But, in the midst of this serenity, Adelaide's quick ear caught a peculiar rolling sound, coming apparently from a distance on the right, and starting up, she asked, "Is not that thunder?" adding, "let us go on quickly, I pray you, Sir."

"Oh, 'twas but the wind amongst the trees, lady," answered the man, hardly moving a limb: but his assertion was contradicted a moment after by a louder and a nearer peal.

All was now bustle and hurry. The horses were prepared in haste, the remnants of the meal packed up, and the whole party mounted. But scarcely had Adelaide advanced a hundred yards, when a bright flash broke across the path; and, ere she had gone half a mile, the rain poured down in torrents. The leader of her little troop was now really kind: often and anxiously he looked back towards her; would fain have stripped himself of his cloak to defend her better from the large, heavy drops that, as they fell, went through and through the gown of black serge which she wore above her ordinary dress; and sent two men away, to the right and left, to see if they could find any cottage, or woodman's hut, which would afford a covering from the storm. A shed was at length discovered, and there two weary hours were passed, till the lady declared, looking up to the sky, that she would rather proceed, notwithstanding the continued rain, than delay her journey longer. The leader of the troop was not unwilling, and, after a short pause, they again began their march, and proceeded for a mile, or somewhat more, uninterrupted. The rain still poured upon their heads, and, far from affording any shelter, the trees seemed but to collect the water amongst the branches, and then let it fall in larger drops upon the travellers as they

passed. But at length they seemed to approach the verge of the wood; for, through the avenue of tall beeches which they were now pursuing, Adelaide could see an open field of green corn, with some shrubs and scattered brushwood beyond again, though the grey film of heavy drops, which hung like a thin curtain over all the distant objects, prevented her from distinguishing anything clearly. It was evident, however, that the leader of the band thought they were approaching a point of some danger; for he sent on one of his horsemen a little in advance, to reconnoitre the ground, and followed more slowly, as if unwilling to advance till he had received intelligence. The man returned in a minute at full speed, and said something, in a low tone, which the lady did not distinctly hear. Instantly, however, the leader turned to her, exclaiming, "Ride back, lady, with your woman. There are armed men in front, who, he thinks, have seen him: ride back to the shed. We will--"

But, ere he could finish his sentence, or Adelaide could ask any questions, there was the sound of many horses' feet beating the plashy ground at a quick pace; and, looking between the shoulders of the horsemen who were in front, the lady saw a number of mounted men coming rapidly down the road. All was, in a minute, confusion and bustle: Adelaide's male companions hastening to spread out across the road before her, at once to conceal her flight and to prevent pursuit. Without waiting to see more, she drew her rein in terror, and urging her horse into its quickest pace, dashed away till she reached the narrow turning which led to the small woodman's shed, up which she instantly directed her course, nor stopped till she saw the rough hut, with its thatched roof raised upon six bare poles. There, however, she paused, and looked behind, thinking that Bertha was following; but the girl was not to be seen.

The lady listened; but for a moment no sound was heard: then the quick trampling of horses' feet reached her ear; and Adelaide fancied that Bertha was coming; but the beasts and their riders passed by the end of the little path,--at least she believed that they must have done so, for no one appeared, and the sounds grew gradually fainter and more faint, till at length they died away. The poor girl's heart sank. What had become of her companions? she thought; what had become of Bertha? Had they met with her father's soldiery, and been routed and driven back? and was she left there, in the midst of the wood, alone, and without help or guidance? Every fearful image that fancy could call up presented itself to her mind; and, though Adelaide was not faint-hearted, yet, for a time, her courage failed at the thought of all that might occur to her under such circumstances. She struggled against her terrors, indeed,--she would not dwell upon the dangers; and she was nerving her mind to consider calmly what it was best for her to do, when again the trampling sound of horse was heard; and, leaving the beast that bore her, under the woodman's shed, she drew back amongst the trees, and listened. The next moment a loud voice exclaimed, as if shouting to some distant companions, "Here; the hoofs have turned up here. Come on, come on!"

It was evidently not one of the party which had accompanied her from the abbey who was now seeking her, for they knew whither she had gone; and the lady drew further back, still hiding herself amongst the wet trees and bushes, yet leaving herself just room to see what passed on the open spot around the shed. The boughs had hardly ceased waving where she had pushed them aside, when, first a single soldier, leading his horse by the bridle, appeared, and then two or three others, mounted. Their faces were strange to her; they were none of the men of Ehrenstein; but that they were seeking her, soon seemed clear, for one of them exclaimed, "Ah, here's the girl's horse--take care; don't frighten it;" and, bending down low, behind the bushes, Adelaide remained as still as death; but with a beating heart. What more was said she did not hear, though the men remained some time, and seemed to converse eagerly: but that which appeared most strange was, that, as far as she could see, they made no attempt to search the copses around; and at length, mounting their horses again, rode quietly, but quickly, away.

For several minutes, she did not venture to raise her head; but when at length she did so, and looked towards the shed, she saw that the jennet which had brought her thither was gone. At first her brain seemed to swim with terror, and her knees shook violently. Alone, in a part of the country which she did not know, without any means of proceeding but such as her own weary and trembling limbs afforded--surrounded, perhaps, by those who were seeking to carry her to an imprisonment which would almost be worse than death--or in the midst of wild, lawless bands, which were but too numerous in those days,--with night fast approaching, and no shelter near but the wide wood, what was she to do?--whither was she to go?--where could she find refuge?

Such agonizing thoughts rushed rapidly through her mind, and it was long ere she could calm herself sufficiently to reflect upon any plan of action. At length, however, she remembered the green corn which she had seen growing at the opening of the road, and she thought, too, that her eyes had rested upon the foliage of the vine. Such signs of cultivation implied the proximity of some careful hands, and as these things recurred to her, hope began to revive.

"I will wait," she said, at length, "till night begins to fall, and then quietly find my way forward, and seek out the peasant's dwelling who has tilled those fields. Though rude, the boors are kind-hearted; and I am sure they will give me shelter for the night, and, perhaps, help me on my way to-morrow."

She seated herself, therefore; and, though still grieved, anxious, and sad, confidence in some degree returned. She prayed, and her heart felt strengthened and comforted. The nightingale broke out into song, in a tree overhead. A timid hare ran along before her--paused, and stood erect with lifted ears--ran on--paused again and listened more than once before it was lost to her

sight; and Adelaide thought, "Why should not I, frightened, and in danger, like this poor beast, follow its example, and make my way forward with the same careful caution?"

She resolved to do so; and rising, she crept back to the small path that led from the woodman's shed to the wider road which she had lately been travelling, and then gazed along it as far as the eye could reach. Nothing was visible; though in the cool evening light, with the sun just upon the horizon, shining out from beneath the exhausted clouds, she could see clearly as far as a spot about two hundred yards in advance, where the path, taking a turn, was lost amongst the trees. With a cautious step she went on, pausing to listen every minute, till she gained a sight of the continuation of the little way. All was still clear; but yet she feared to trust herself in the wider road, which she could now perceive crossing the path she was following; and, drawing somewhat back behind an oak, she watched eagerly for a moment or two, while the sun sank, the rosy light that tinged the clouds overhead died away, and the grey shadow of the coming night was cast upon the earth.

"I must go on," she said to herself; but still she dreaded to do so, and did not move, till suddenly a tall hart came slowly trotting down the road, passed the end of the path in which she was, after standing for a moment to gaze, as if considering which way he should take, and disappeared in the very direction in which she was proceeding.

"There is no one there," thought the poor girl; "the beast's instinct shall serve my weaker sense, and give me courage to go on."

Without further hesitation she went upon her way, turned up the road to the right, and followed it quickly, for the light was failing fast. Night had completely closed in ere the trees ended; and she found herself standing by a field of green corn, with what seemed a little patch of vineyard on a slope beyond, and a dim line of trees farther forward still. The stars were out in the sky above, for by this time the stormy clouds had cleared away; but there was, in the scene, a pleasanter light to the eye of the poor wanderer, than even the twinkling lamps of heaven. At some distance to the right, were seen a number of what she concluded were cottage windows, with rays, as if from fires or candles within, streaming forth upon the darkness; and, at her side, she saw the commencement of a path, apparently leading, to the village or hamlet.

She was very weary; but that sight gave her strength; and, with a quickened pace, she hurried on. The lights grew more distinct as she advanced, and she caught a faint glimpse of the buildings before her. There were cottages, evidently, and a little church; but a larger and more imposing edifice appeared on the left. It might be a stronghold--it might be a monastery or convent; and Adelaide tried to recollect all she had heard of the places in the neighbourhood, in order to divine what the building could be that now rose before her eyes, towering higher over the trees every step, as she came nearer. She knew not, however, how far she had gone, or what direction she had taken, and she only puzzled herself with conjectures, till she arrived at the first house of the village, which stood a little in advance of those tall walls, from which no light proceeded. From two windows of the lesser building, indeed, the friendly rays were streaming plentifully; and Adelaide determined to pause there, and ask for shelter; but she found some difficulty in approaching it. It was a small house, within a garden, apparently neither the cottage of a peasant, nor the dwelling of a farmer; for there was a low wall round the garden, and that wall, again, was surrounded by a foss, full of water. It did not seem, indeed, defensible against any large force; but it was, at all events, guarded against the sudden attack of mairauders; and Adelaide thought she could see the wall winding along till it joined that of the larger building behind. On the side next to her she could find no entrance, nor any means of passing the moat; but when she had walked on, round the angle of the wall, there appeared a little wooden bridge, and a door, with the masonry raised several feet on either side, so that no one approaching by the bridge could leap over into the garden. By the side of the door was the large iron pulley of a bell; but the young wanderer paused, doubting whether she should ring there, or go on to one of the cottages a little further up the hill. She was very weary, however; her limbs felt powerless; her heart was faint; and with a feeling like despair, she put forth her hand and rang the bell.

The next minute she heard a door open within the enclosure, and a step cross the garden. Then a wooden shutter was drawn back from before a small aperture in the gate, barred with iron; and a voice asked, "Who is there?"

It was a woman's tongue; and oh, how sweetly it sounded in Adelaide's ears!

"I have lost my way in the wood," she replied, "and have suffered much. I am wet, weary, and faint, and I pray you give me shelter for the night, in Our Lady's name."

"Are you alone, poor thing?" asked the woman.

"Quite," answered the lady: "I was not alone in truth, for I had some men from the abbey of--" She paused, and omitting the name, went on--"from the abbey, with me and my maid; but we were met by an armed band, who attacked us, and I fled. Since then I have wandered on, and know not where I am."

The woman uttered a short exclamation, as of surprise; but she opened the door quickly, and Adelaide, the moment after, stood in a little garden pleasantly laid out in walks covered over with vines trained upon poles.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Your steps totter, poor child," said the woman who opened the gate to Adelaide; "here, lean upon my arm; but first let me make fast the door. We live in strange bad times; but here you will be safe, if there is safety to be found; for no one will venture to assail the Convent of the Holy Cross, or those who live beneath its walls."

Adelaide made no reply; for there are moments when the motives for exertion having ceased, the very relief from terror and anxiety is in itself overpowering, and the corporeal frame yields at the instant of deliverance to the weight it had borne up under during the period of peril. She perceived by a faint light, which streamed from the half open door of the house, that the person who spoke to her was not habited in the garb of a nun, although she mentioned the convent as her assurance of security; but Adelaide could ask no question, make no reply. Everything seemed indistinct and misty; the gardens, with the rays from the windows and the door pouring in long lines through the green leaves of the vine, swam before her eyes; her limbs lost their power, her tongue clove to her mouth, and it was with difficulty that, aided even by the woman's arm, she reached the threshold of the house. Her companion pushed the door further open; and supported her up the little step, but at the top the poor girl leaned more heavily still upon her guide's arm, and the next instant sank gradually, and even slowly, down to the ground; while the old woman held her up as well as she could, calling to some one within for assistance.

In an instant two other figures were added to the group, one coming from a room on the right hand, and another from the back of the house. The former was that of a lady, perhaps forty years of age, though she looked somewhat older; for her dress was not one calculated to conceal the effects of time, or to set off the lingering beauties that years had spared, to the greatest advantage. It was all of black, except the head gear, which was snowy white, and brought far down over the broad fair brow, almost entirely hiding the hair. The colours were those common to many orders of nuns; and there was something in the form of the dress itself which was in a degree conventual, so that, at first sight, one might have taken her for a recluse; but at the second glance one detected many differences from the garb of any established sisterhood. There was no actual veil, a small portion of the hair was seen; there were rings upon the fingers, and though a cross and rosary were hanging at the girdle, there was a locket round the neck, hanging by a gold chain. The other person seemed a superior servant; but poor Adelaide saw none of those things, and when first she opened her eyes again, she found herself in a small chamber furnished with much taste and some luxury. There was tapestry on the walls, not representing figures, as was so frequently the case; but divided into panels by tall columns worked in the web and covered with arabesques, while in the centre of each panel appeared an exquisitely executed group of flowers. All the moveable furniture was formed of some dark wood beautifully carved, and the sombre hue of the material was relieved by rich crimson velvet here and there, while a fine mirror, and two small but beautiful pictures of the very early school, which began, or perhaps I may almost say preceded, the revival of the arts, were sustained against the walls by poles of iron gilt thrust through the tapestry. As the poor girl recovered more fully, she saw an elderly woman-servant kneeling at the end of the bed on which she was laid, assiduously rubbing her feet, while over her bent a face which seemed to her almost that of an angel, and a soft hand bathed her temple with some fine essences.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you," she said, as soon as she could speak; "how kind you are."

"Hush!" said the lady of the house; "not a word at present, my dear child. You will soon be well again, and then you shall speak. Bring a little wine, Biancha, and some dry garments, for these are still wet."

Adelaide took her hand and pressed it in her own; and the servant hastened away for the things she had been ordered to procure. The nun's gown which Adelaide had worn throughout the day had been already taken off, and she now lay in the ordinary dress of a woman of high rank, which was more distinctly marked from the garments of the lower orders in those days than at present. Her station, therefore, could not be doubted; but yet in the look of deep interest with which the lady gazed upon her, there seemed something more than the mere compassion which might well be felt for one accustomed to every comfort and refinement, exposed suddenly to hardships, dangers, and fatigues, and sinking under them. It was a long, thoughtful, wistful look that she fixed upon her. It seemed to scan her face, and ask deep questions of her heart and mind. It was rather, as if it said, what is beneath that lovely countenance? what spirit is within that graceful form? than merely, what are you? what is your name and place in the cold order of this world's classes? But when the poor girl pressed her hand, and looked up with eyes full of petition as well as thanks, the lady smiled sweetly; and yet some drops gathered in her eyes, and one or two rolled over and bedewed her cheek. Then, bending down her head--perhaps in some

degree to hide the tears--she kissed the marble forehead that lay beneath her eyes, and whispered, "You will soon be better.--Hush!--Be patient for a while; we will talk more anon."

The voice was very musical, soft, low, and sweet, with a slight foreign accent; but still so expressive of kindness and tenderness, that had it even used an unknown language, Adelaide would have understood right well its tones of sympathy.

"I am well, now, indeed," she murmured; "and I must thank you from my heart, dear lady, for your kindness."

"Fie!" said her companion; "if you would thank me really, lie still till you have taken some nourishment. Then you shall speak, and tell me all that has befallen you. Oh! here is Biancha--Now take a little wine. Dip a morsel of bread in it first, and swallow that. Then sip the rest. It will not do you harm."

Adelaide followed her directions, shaking her head, however, with a smile, and saying, "It was not food I wanted, but rest and peace."

"Peace!" said the lady, with a melancholy look; "is there such a thing on earth? Alas! my child--"

But she did not finish the sentence; and after her fair guest had taken the wine, she aided the maid to change the wet garments, and put on some loose clothing for her, which, if it fitted not quite well, at least felt warm and comforting.

"Now lie and rest," said the lady, "and tell me how this has been. The girl who let you in says, that you were travelling under the guard of some men from the abbey--What abbey did she mean?--that near Ehrenstein?"

"The same," answered Adelaide; but she paused there and hesitated, looking at the maid.

The lady seemed to comprehend her hesitation at once, and said, "Leave us, Biancha;" and when she was gone, she added, "You might trust her, my child. She is faithful and true--ay, and discreet, as she has proved herself through many a year. And so you separated from your guides, and lost your way in the foul day we have had? How did that happen?"

"At the edge of the wood, hard by," answered Adelaide, not anxious to be questioned too closely upon other subjects, "they saw a party of armed men, who seemed about to attack them; and they told me, with the maid, to ride back and wait at a woodman's shed, where we had found shelter some time before from the storm. I rode away in terror, thinking that Bertha followed; but--how or why, I know not--she never came. I fear the men of the abbey were attacked and discomfited, for I heard horses galloping furiously past, as if in flight and pursuit; and soon after they came up towards the place where I was, and I fled amongst the trees, on foot, and watched them from behind the bushes. They did not seek for me far; but took away my horse, which I had left standing, weary, there. Thus it was that I was forced to find my way onward alone, with night coming on."

"And whither were you going, my child?" asked the lady, gazing at her face somewhat earnestly.

Adelaide hesitated, but she could not well evade the question; and she answered at length, in a low tone, "To Heiligenstein, lady."

"And who sent you thither?" was the next question.

"One of the good Fathers of the abbey," replied Adelaide, "who has been very kind to me and mine. His name is Father George."

The lady instantly cast her arms around her, and kissed her tenderly. "You are at Heiligenstein, my child," she whispered; "and it was to me that George of Altenburg sent you. Rest in peace, dear Adelaide; rest in peace. You are with a mother."

Adelaide returned her embrace gratefully; but then raised her eyes, and gazed inquiringly in the lady's face. Strange, mingled emotions thrilled through her bosom, not to be told, not to be separated. She saw a likeness to features that she knew and loved; she saw a likeness in the expression; she saw it in the peculiar light of the eyes: The tones of that lady's voice, too, were like his; and she had said to her, his bride, "You are with a mother." "But yet how could that be?" she asked herself. Ferdinand's mother had been long dead, she had been told; he himself believed that it was so. Even Father George, when revealing to her much of his history (more, indeed, than her lover knew himself), had never mentioned the existence of that parent; and yet there was something which made Adelaide still believe that she was indeed with the mother of him she loved. To hear the lady call Father George by the name which he had long ceased to use, did not surprise her at all; for both from words which he had himself spoken, and from the contemptuous epithet which her father had applied to Ferdinand, she was already aware that the monk was a member of that high house; but all her thoughts turned to the one question, Who was the kind and gentle being that sat beside her?

What is like thought? Nothing that ever was created or devised. Rapid as the lightning, but yet not like it; not one broad glare extinguished as soon as seen, but full of combinations, rushing through innumerable channels, working out a thousand permanent results. Though in its process and celerity of operation, it has been well called "the lightning of the mind," it can, in all its attributes, be compared to nothing that earth has seen. All that I have related, and much more, passed through Adelaide's mind, and yet it required but the short interval occupied by the return of the caress which the lady gave her, for her thus to commune with herself. The pause was but momentary, and then the lady added, as if she had hardly stopped, "I will be to you as a mother, dear child."

Those few words rendered all the poor girl's conclusions once more vague and undefined. It might be but a form of speech she had used, Adelaide thought; and Adelaide mused.

"And are you like your father?" asked the lady at length; after having gazed for a minute or two on the countenance of the fair creature before her, while the long, dark lashes of the downcast eyes rested on her cheek as she meditated.

"I do not know," answered Adelaide, looking suddenly up. "You do not know him, then?"

"I never saw him," replied the lady, thoughtfully, and even gravely; but after a moment she went on--"We will ask each other no more questions, dear girl. Here you can stay in safety and peace. That is enough for the present; all the rest will soon be explained; and between two agitated and apprehensive hearts, like Yours and mine, it is better only to speak of things that may tranquillize and reassure us."

"And are you, too, agitated and apprehensive?" asked Adelaide. "How, then, can I rest here in peace?"

"Agitated! ay, and full of fears, I am, indeed," answered the lady; "but they are not such as affect you, my child. If it is for Ferdinand you fear, doubt not that he is safe, for I have had assurance of it; if for yourself, set your mind at rest, for though this house may seem but an insecure asylum against the pursuit of those who would take you hence, yet, first, they know not where you are; and next, by the side of the very bed on which you lie, is a door that leads at once within the convent walls. That place is holy, and those walls are strong. If there be men daring enough to try to force them, there is power at hand to resist. Now, my child, I will leave you to repose; for it is that which you most need. Sleep--and Heaven's best benison be upon you!"

Carefully and kindly the lady shaded the lamp, but left it still burning, placed a little silver bell by Adelaide's side, and assuring her that if she needed aught, she had but to ring, and it would be instantly brought to her, she kissed her with motherly tenderness, and left her.

Adelaide leaned her head upon her hand; but her thoughts were all bewildered with the events just passed. There are moments when the mind is too busy for sleep to still its wild activity, but when the agitation of the heart renders thought vain and fruitless. She could not think--she could not sleep: she could only feel. She was then, for the first time, absent from her father's dwelling. She was the bride of a single day, with her bridegroom absent she knew not where. She was a fugitive among strangers, who were kind and gentle to her; but who they were she knew not. She had passed through dangers and fatigues such as she had never endured before; and who could say when they might be renewed? How could she either sleep or think when such impressions were all fresh upon her? and there she lay till hour after hour had passed by,--till the convent bell sounded midnight, and all seemed still and at rest but the heavy marker of the passing time. Just then, however, she heard a dull sound like the trampling of horses, and terror began to take possession of her again. The sound came nearer and more near, and she stretched out her hand to ring the bell which had been left by her side, when suddenly rose up a strain of rich harmony in the midst of the darkness and stillness of the night. Adelaide heard but little of the lay, but thus sang a number of wild but fine voices, as the cavalcade passed by:--

SONG.

"The world's all at peace, and the sunshiny earth
Is teeming with riches and joy;
And each passing minute to pleasure gives birth,
And manhood's as gay as the boy.
"Now hark to the sound
Of the horn and the hound,
As they waken the valley and wood:--
Hide your head, hide your head,
From the march of the dead!
'Tis the giant Black Huntsman is riding afar;
'Tis the blast of the trumpet,--the grim dogs of war;
And the land shall be deluged in blood:
Hide your head!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

It was a gloomy meal, the dinner at the castle of Ehrenstein; and would have been gloomier still, had it not been for the presence of one of those persons who in that age were privileged to mingle jest, if not mirth, with every event of life's chequered course, and make the wedding or the funeral alike the occasion of their wild satire. A number of the troops of Leiningen had gone forth to scour the country round in pursuit of the fugitive Baron of Eppelfeld; but Count Frederick himself had been persuaded, somewhat more easily than his host had expected, to remain till after the mid-day meal. A few courteous entreaties were all that the frank old nobleman required; and whether they were sincere or not, he evidently received them as such, saying that he could well trust his good riders to trap an old fox, though it might have grown grey in its cunning; but that, if they had not succeeded by two hours after noon, he would mount himself.

All was hurry and confusion during the morning, however; and the castle looked more like a fortress, the garrison of which expected immediate attack, than the dwelling of a high noble in a time of peace. Parties were hourly coming in or going forth, messengers arrived or were despatched continually, and even the hall and the festive board were not free from business and importunity. The brow of the Count of Ehrenstein remained as black as night; nothing could move his lip to a smile; and as he sat at the head of the table in the lesser hall, with a greatly diminished party around, his very look spread gloom over the feast, and saddened the gayest hearts present.

Count Frederick strove to comfort and console him; but the Lord of Ehrenstein heard his words in silence, or replied in monosyllables. The priest ate the rich food and drank the fine wine, without venturing more than a few words in praise of both; the knights sat round, and partook of their good cheer, with only a whisper amongst themselves now and then; and no one spoke but the jester, who, as usual, held on his captious course, as if nothing had occurred to interrupt the merriment; or, at least, as if he were in utter ignorance that such had been the case.

Those were days of privilege, when every prescriptive right, however ridiculous and sometimes iniquitous it might be, was revered as a part of a great system; and even the privilege of the jester was held so sacred, that any man who ventured to show serious anger at what he might say, would have been considered either as a fool or a tyrant. Thus our friend, on the present occasion, ventured, without the least fear, to touch upon all those subjects which were most painful to the master of the dwelling; sometimes wondering if the Lady Adelaide fared as well in the fields as they did in the castle, sometimes choosing to suppose that Ferdinand of Altenburg must have gained a goodly appetite by his early walk.

At length he exclaimed, looking round, "How silent you are, noble cousins! I know that it proceeds from your admiration for my rich talk; so, to improve your manners, I will give you a lecture upon morals. What is the cause of young men getting into all sorts of mischief? Answer, or I will answer for you."

"Want of sense," replied Count Frederick: "it can be nothing else."

"Wrong, uncle--ever wrong," cried the jester; "for then would old men get into mischief, too. God love you! there is as little sense under a grey beard as under a brown one, and more than either under none at all. Look you now, the Lady Adelaide has more sense than her father, though she has no beard, and he has a long one; and then he has more sense than I have, and his beard is but grey, while mine is white. Try again, uncle, try again."

"I have you now," answered the Count: "it is want of experience, you would say."

"Wrong once more," answered the jester. "See you not that those who have had most experience still do foolish things. Who would have thought that an armed lord, with well nigh five hundred men in his train, would have trusted sundry sacks of gold to be carried by peaceful merchants, when he could have brought it himself? No, no, uncle: 'tis the great fault of all men--want of faith."

"Nay, but, Herr von Narren, this is a lecture on religion, not on morals, then," replied his lord.

"Not a whit, not a whit," cried the jester. "Want of faith in all things is bad; but I dabble not with religion. Let the cobbler stick to his awl: I am a moralist and philosopher, not a priest; and yet I say it is want of faith that gets young men into mischief; for, did we believe what those who have tried tell those who have not tried, we should 'scape many a danger. But we never do believe in this world; we always think that we shall be better off than our neighbours, and therefore wish to try for ourselves. Is not that morality for you now? And see how it is proved every day. Cage your bird for its own good, and it will beat itself to death to get out; or, leave the door open for a minute, and it flies away to be pecked to death by the first hawk it meets. Is it not

so, good Count of Ehrenstein?"

"Faith! I do not know," replied the Count; "but this I do know, that if some birds, who have escaped from *my* cage, fall into my hands again, I will wring their heads off."

"So do men get bloody fingers," answered the jester; "but, after all, who is there among us that has not some stain upon his hand? No one except myself, I warrant. There is a lily palm, with not a drop of Christian blood upon it; and as for the gore of a few stray Saracens, that but cleanses a man's fingers; as a farmer's maiden uses sand, which is dirt, to scrub her father's floor."

The Count of Ehrenstein's brow had become doubly dark, but he ventured to give no other sign of his anger at the words of a mere jester; and turning to a man who entered, booted and spurred, just at the conclusion of Herr von Narren's speech, he inquired, "Well, what news? Are there any tidings of them?"

"None, my good lord," answered the man; "all the world are so busy with other thoughts, that they seem to have paid no attention to anything but one."

"Ay, and what is that one?" said Count Frederick, turning to the messenger also.

"Why, the Black Huntsman is out again, my lord," said the man; "and old Seckendorf sent me back to let my lord know that all the country is ringing with his doings. He rode all the way down the valley last night, and some say, went down to the Rhine, while others will have it, that he turned towards Zweibrücken."

"Then we must make ready for war, I suppose," replied Count Frederick; "but is the news quite sure?"

"Oh, quite," answered the messenger; "we counted more than a hundred horses' feet all the way along the dusty old road upon the top of the hills."

"Did they stop at the abbey?" asked the Count of Ehrenstein, with a sneering smile.

"No, my lord; they left it far to the left," was the man's answer, "keeping along amongst the hills, until we lost them in the wood, some six miles off."

"Well, let it come," said the Count musing, and speaking rather to what was passing in his own thoughts, than in reference to anything that had been said by others; "let it come. It shall go hard, if the tide of war flows through this valley, but that one of the waves shall sweep away the walls of the abbey--ay, and all that are within;" he muttered between his teeth.

"My lord, my lord!" cried a man, who was seated near the window; "here comes news at length, or I am mistaken. Some one galloping like mad up from the bridge."

"Bring him up quick, as soon as he arrives," cried the Count of Ehrenstein, turning to the attendants behind him; and the meal resumed its course for a few minutes; though few of those principally interested in the events which had taken place during that morning and the preceding night, showed any great appetite for the dainties before them.

At length, quick steps were heard in the outer chamber, and the two Counts turned their faces towards the door with the eager look of expectation. Some of the servants of the castle were the first that appeared; but immediately behind them was a stranger, dressed in the garb of the middle orders, and offering nothing very remarkable, either in his person or apparel. The Count of Ehrenstein, as was not unusual with him, fixed his eyes for a moment on the new comer, without speaking. It seemed, as if he loved to question men's faces, and to read the character in the countenance before he ventured anything in words himself. It is not an unfrequent habit with all men of dark and subtle natures; but before he could speak on the present occasion, the person who thus sought his presence, looked inquiringly from his countenance to that of Count Frederick of Leiningen, and then asked, "Which is the Count of Ehrenstein?"

"I am he," replied the Count; "what would you with me, Sir?"

"I bring you this letter, my lord," answered the man; "I was told to deliver it with all speed."

The Count took it, gazed thoughtfully at the superscription, and then raising his eyes to the man's face, demanded, "Who gave you this?"

"Faith! my good lord, I do not know," replied the man; "it was a young gentleman, of a fair countenance, and a good bearing, some twenty years of age or so; and he gave me ten crowns out of his purse, to carry it to you with all speed."

"Had he any one with him? Was he on foot or on horseback?" inquired the Count.

"Quite alone, my lord," answered the man; "but he rode as fine a horse as ever carried knight or noble."

The Count made no observation, but opened the letter and read. Then laying it down upon the

table by his side, he laid his hand upon it, and seemed lost in thought; but after a moment, he pushed the paper over to Count Frederick, saying, "Read, my friend, read; for it concerns you too. Methinks this youth is bold, or else backed by means we know not of."

Without reply, Count Frederick took the letter, and read as follows:--

"FERDINAND OF ALTENBURG TO THE COUNT OF EHRENSTEIN,
WITH HUMBLE AND RESPECTFUL GREETING.

"MY LORD THE COUNT,

"Finding myself in peril within the walls of your castle, and doubting that you would give me other judgment than that of your own court, which, as a stranger of noble birth, not born upon the lands of Ehrenstein, I am not lawfully subject to, I have thought fit to take such means of escape as were at hand, and have used them to good purpose. Nevertheless, I wish you to know that in thus flying from the castle of Ehrenstein, I have no will or purpose to escape from fair trial and judgment of my guilt or innocence, by a free and open court of knights or gentlemen of good degree, and that I am ready to submit myself to such, in any sure place, when I shall be certified that I shall have impartial judgment. I am now upon the lands of Leiningen, and will there remain, claiming protection of that noble prince, the Count Frederick, but ready at all times to appear before a court summoned anywhere within his jurisdiction, and consisting, in at least one-half, of persons who are not retainers of the Count of Ehrenstein. To their decree, I shall bow without appeal, in all matters between you and me, provided you also pledge yourself to abide by their decision, whatever it may be.

"A summons to appear, according to the terms of this letter, with the guarantee of Count Frederick, that they shall be duly observed, will meet my eye, if hung upon the gates of the castle of Hardenberg, and I will appear accordingly, at the place and time appointed."

Such was the tenor of the letter now laid before Count Frederick of Leiningen; and after he had read it, he mused several minutes without commenting upon its contents, till an impatient "Well!" from the Count of Ehrenstein roused him from his reverie.

"You think the letter bold, Ehrenstein," he said; "but in this you are not impartial. To me it seems fair enough. One who is willing to submit himself to the free judgment of unbiassed men, can be conscious of no great wrong."

The Count of Ehrenstein clenched his hand tight as it lay upon the table, till the veins and sinews seemed starting through the skin, and he muttered between his teeth, "You too, Leiningen!"

Count Frederick took no notice of the reproachful words; but calmly inquired, "What say you, my good friend? Will you accept the terms?"

"Your wishing me to do so, my lord the Count," replied the master of the castle somewhat sternly, "shows that you are not disposed to act the more friendly part, and aid me in hunting down the treacherous hound, as I would do with you in similar circumstances. Think you, that if a follower of your house had injured you as deeply as this youth has injured me, that I would not pursue him through my lands till I had caught him, and then give him up to you, to deal with at your pleasure?"

"I would not ask you, Ehrenstein," replied Count Frederick, coldly; "justice and fair dealing have ever been my motto. He offers to submit to justice, and I will have no hand in refusing it to him. If you will accept his terms, well; I will name four honest men to judge him, and you shall name an equal number. Doubt not, if he have committed the crime with which you charge him, they will pronounce due sentence on him, and I will see it executed; but if he can free himself of the charge, God give him good deliverance! Once more, what say you?"

"What must be, must be," answered the Count; "and as I can have no better, I will take these terms."

"Well, then," replied Count Frederick, rising, "I will see that notice be duly given on the gates of my castle of Hardenberg, and will appoint what place and hour you may think fit. When shall it be, and where?"

The Count of Ehrenstein thought for a moment or two, and then said, "To-morrow, at midnight, if you will. Then for the place--you know the large old chapel, half way between Hardenberg and Mosbach."

"At midnight!" said Count Frederick, in a tone of much surprise.

"Ay, at midnight," answered the Count of Ehrenstein; "I cannot well be there before, my good friend. I have another fugitive to seek and find."

Count Frederick's brow grew rather clouded, for he had doubts which he did not choose to

express; but merely bowing his head in silent acquiescence, he left the hall with his followers; and ere another hour had passed, he and his train were riding down the hill, away from Ehrenstein.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Imbibing somewhat of the spirit of the age whereof I write, I have, perhaps, in this true history, neglected to a certain degree the inferior persons of the tale, keeping myself among lords and ladies, counts and barons, to the exclusion from consideration of not less worthy and serviceable people; but the events at which I am now arrived, require me absolutely to descend from this high elevation, and to notice the fate of one whom, in a former part of the story, I have spoken of with some partiality.

It will not be difficult for the reader to recollect, that when Adelaide of Ehrenstein fled in terror towards the woodman's shed, she imagined that her maid Bertha was following as fast as 'the four legs of her horse would carry her, and that soon after she discovered, to her consternation and surprise, that such was not the case. What became of Bertha in the mean time? In truth, the good gay girl had every inclination in the world to do as she was told; but, nevertheless, she did not follow her mistress ten steps; for, in the hurry and confusion of the moment, while endeavouring to extricate herself from the men and horses that were pressing to the front in order to favour the lady's escape, the long nun's gown, with which she was covered, caught in one of the large stirrup-irons of those days, and pulled her from her horse, as the beast hurried on in the direction which had been given to it.

She fell heavily, and was somewhat confused and stunned by the concussion, so that a moment or two went by without her being aware of anything that passed around. She felt herself raised from the earth, however, heard a number of voices speaking, saw various indistinct objects moving quickly about, and, as sense began to return fully, beheld a party of armed men surrounding her companions of the way and herself, although the body which had quitted the abbey in the morning, seemed to be diminished by two or three.

The first words which she heard clearly, were pronounced in a loud but melodious tone, and were as follows:--"Pursue them quickly, and bring them back. Seek for the girl's horse also. We must know what all this means."

Looking up in the direction of the sounds, Bertha beheld a tall, powerful man on horseback, some five or ten yards before her, with fifteen or sixteen other gentlemen; some fully armed according to the custom of the day, but others in the garb of peace. Round about, and in the open space behind, were not less than two or three hundred soldiers, but the principal personage of the whole, he who had spoken, displayed no arms whatever, except the ordinary sword and dagger. He was clothed in a loose coat of buff leather, trimmed with rich fur, and embroidered with gold thread in various quaint devices. Some careful and laborious needle had worked all over it the figures of birds, and flowers, and leaves, of syrens and armed men, and stags, and hounds, and mermaids; and on his head he wore a bonnet of crimson velvet, and a high plume of feathers, white as snow. His age might be between forty and fifty, but his beard and hair were black as jet, and his teeth white and fine. His countenance was pleasing, though there was something of a cold and sarcastic smile upon it, and the air with which he sat his horse was graceful but somewhat haughty. For a minute or two he said no more; but continued to gaze over the heads of those before him down the road into the wood, then turning his horse with a light hand, he exclaimed: "Wait, Rudolph, till they have brought those men back, then follow me, bringing them with you."

Leading the way onward at the head of the troop, the person who had spoken pursued the same course which the party at the abbey had been taking. About fifty of his followers remained behind, guarding those who might now be considered prisoners; and though a deep silence succeeded to the great man's departure, Bertha, whose tongue was not under the most strict control, ventured at length to ask the man next her, "Who was that who has just ridden away?"

The person she addressed was one of her fellow-captives, and he answered in a low voice, "The Emperor, going to Spire, they say."

He immediately relapsed into silence, and Bertha's brain began to revolve the circumstances in which she was placed, and to inquire whether there was no chance of her being able to extract good out of evil, and to turn her captivity to some advantage. There were difficulties, however, which she saw not how to overcome: for, in the very first instance, she knew not what to do in regard to her fair mistress. "If I leave her in the wood, poor simple thing," said Bertha to herself,

"Heaven only knows what will become of her. She has not wit nor experience enough to get herself out of a difficulty, and, like a bird fresh from a cage, she will go fluttering about hither and thither till she is starved to death, or pecked to pieces by birds of prey. Then, again, if I tell these people where she is to be found, a thousand to one they will send her back at once to her father, and that will be worse than all. I wish to Heaven I could get a word with the man he called Rudolph, just to see what stuff he is made of."

A moment or two after, the sound of horses coming up the road was heard, and Bertha, looking round, perceived several of the Emperor's soldiers, bringing with them two of the men of the abbey, who had fled some minutes before. The leader of the party which had remained to guard the prisoners, saw the same objects, and pushed his horse a little forward, till he was nearly by the girl's side. Taking advantage of the opportunity, which she thought might not occur again, Bertha drew near to him, saying: "My lord, I wish to speak with you."

The only answer she obtained, however, was,--"Hold your tongue, pretty mistress; I have nothing to do with this business. You must speak with the Emperor, if you have anything to say."

"But how can I speak with him, when he is not here?" cried the girl, impatiently.

"Oh, he will talk with you at Spires," replied the officer; "he never objects to see a pretty face, and I will tell him you want to speak to him--there, hold your tongue now, for I cannot attend to you."

In a few minutes after, the horse which Adelaide had ridden was brought forward, and Bertha lifted on it without question or ceremony. The men of the abbey were arranged in a line, a part of the Emperor's guard went before, and the rest followed; and at a quick pace, they pursued their way toward Spires, consoling themselves as best they could.

Night came on, not long after, and under the influence of darkness and fatigue, Bertha's good spirits began to fail her sadly, and her light heart to sink. Nevertheless, hour by hour went by, and it was not till near midnight that the rising moon showed her some tall towers and steeples, which indicated they were approaching Spires. By this time, however, all power of talking had left her, and she could hardly sit her horse. The gates of that large and then splendid city were closed when the party reached them, and the few minutes that passed before they were opened, seemed to poor Bertha an hour. Then came the long and melancholy streets, lighted alone by an occasional moonbeam, or the torch or lantern carried before some knight or citizen on his way homeward from a late meeting. But at length a redder glare was seen at the end of the streets by which they passed, and the watch fire of a large party of soldiers showed the tall towers and massive walls of the stupendous cathedral, with the cupola long since destroyed, standing out harsh and severe against the starry sky.

"I can go no farther," said Bertha, in a faint voice to one of the men who rode beside her; "I shall drop off my horse."

"'Tis not far, 'tis not far to the Retscher," answered the man, good-humouredly; "bear up a little, poor maiden, till you reach the palace, and there you will be lodged comfortably, and well treated. I will speak with Count Rudolph, who has a kind heart, though a rough tongue."

Thus saying, he rode on; and in a few minutes after, the large massive building called the Retscher, which served as the Imperial palace when any of the Emperors visited Spires, appeared lighted by innumerable flambeaux, stuck in large stone stands before the steps. Though the hour was so late, all the courtly world seemed awake and busy; guards, attendants, pages were moving about; persons in rich dresses were seen coming in and going out of the various doors, and the weary head of poor Bertha seemed to whirl in the midst of a gayer scene than she had ever witnessed before, as she was detained for a few minutes before the principal entrance, while the leader of the party, and one or two of his companions went in.

At length, however, Count Rudolph, as he was called, appeared again, and approaching the side of the tired girl's horse, lifted her off himself, and aided her up the steps, saying, "You must repose and refresh yourself to-night, fair lady; and the Emperor will see you early to-morrow."

Bertha could only reply by bowing her head; and, accompanying him into the palace, was led up several flights of steps, and through numerous passages, amidst servants and officers, till at length her conductor stopped before an elderly man, who had been sitting playing at tables with a page in one of the vestibules, but who instantly rose and bowed respectfully.

"Where is the room for the lady?" asked the Count, quickly.

"The page will show it, my lord," answered the old man; and given over to the guidance of a gay-looking good-humoured youth, Bertha was led on to a small but comfortable chamber at the end of the gallery. She saw that the young gentleman gazed at her, with a look of interest, from time to time; and fully conscious of her own good looks, the pretty maiden might not at any other time have failed to encourage his young gallantry, but she was too weary even for a light word; and when at length he lighted the lamp upon the table, and asked if he could do aught else to serve her, she only answered, "I am very faint."

"I will bring you some wine in an instant, beautiful lady," he said; and running away before she

could decline, he soon returned with some wine and bread, and dried fruits.

He lingered as long as she would let him, pressed her to eat and drink, and seemed very willing to assist at her toilet also; but at length she contrived to send him away; and going back to his old companion, he declared with all the wild enthusiasm and glowing imagination of youth, that she was the loveliest creature that had ever been created.

Bertha slept well, and slept long; nor was it till some one tried to open her door, which she had wisely locked, that she awoke on the following morning. The early visitor who thus roused her, proved to be a woman sent to give her assistance, but she was hardly dressed when one of the attendants came to summon her to the Emperor's presence. Bertha would fain have had more time to consider what she should say or do, but none was allowed her; and, trusting to woman's ready wit, she followed the man, who showed her a degree of deference and respect which somewhat surprised her. Descending two flights of steps, she was led to a door before which stood some armed men, and in a moment after was introduced into a small cabinet, where sat the same high person she had seen the day before, but with his head now uncovered, and a loose robe of rich fur cast negligently over his shoulders. He rose as she entered, and when the attendant had retired, advanced a step, saying, "You wished to see me, lady.--But first tell me, is it true that I see the daughter of my noble acquaintance, the Count of Ehrenstein?"

Bertha's heart sank; for if the Emperor were indeed a friend of the Count of Ehrenstein, how would he judge, she asked herself, his daughter's escape from her father's roof?--and what would be his dealings with one who had aided and accompanied her in her flight? She had but a moment to ask herself the question, for the Emperor continued gazing on her, and then repeated the question almost sternly.

Bertha cast herself at his feet, and, giving way to awe and apprehension, burst into tears, sobbing forth, "No, mighty Sir."

"Who are you then, pretty maiden?" asked the monarch, raising her, and forcing her to sit down. "These men who were with you have been telling my people a strange tale of doings somewhat rash and unruly in the castle of Ehrenstein. I understood from them that you were the Count's daughter; and, although it were not quite politic in me, placed as I am, to countenance disobedience in a child towards a parent, yet, in favour of your bright eyes, I would certainly endeavour to mediate between you and the Count, should you be really his daughter, and, at all events, would protect you from hardship or violence; for I know that he is somewhat stern and severe, and has little indulgence even for beauty and gentleness."

His words gave new life to poor Bertha, who from time to time had given the monarch a furtive glance through the tears, from a pair of dark lustrous eyes, which might well win the admiration they seemed to have excited; and seeing both that she had gained some advantage, and that the Emperor was not in a mood, or of a character, to deal hardly with her fair mistress, even if she were in his power, she resolved to give him her own version of the story of Adelaide of Ehrenstein.

"I am not fit, Sire," she replied, rising, "to sit in such a presence as this. Your officers have made a mistake in thinking that I am the Lady Adelaide: I am but a very poor and humble companion of that lady, and my proper place is at your Majesty's feet."

She spoke gracefully and well; and, as she again knelt, the monarch felt somewhat like the page, and thought he had seldom seen a lovelier creature.

He would fain have raised her again, however, saying, "Nay, nay: I cannot bear you kneeling, pretty maid; and I must have a fair and free confession of all that has past."

"You shall have one as true as if this were a confessional, Sire," replied Bertha, raising her eyes, with a ray of her old merriment brightening her look; "but ere I rise, I must be promised absolution full and entire."

Woman accommodates herself to new scenes and circumstances more quickly than man, and Bertha had already lost just sufficient of her awe to leave her wits free to act, without diminishing in the least her tone of respect. She had become familiarized with the presence of the Emperor, without for a moment forgetting his station or her own; and there are few things more engaging to that curious being, man, than an air of confidence in his kindness and forbearance. I believe the natural heart of man would lead him, like other beasts, to pursue whatever flies--to crush whatever dreads him.

The Emperor was like the rest of his species, and he was pleased with the gay look that crossed the sad one, and with the confidence that brightened the awe. "Well, well," he said, "you shall have full pardon and absolution for all your pretty little sins, whatever they may be--but rise, maiden, rise."

"I would fain kneel still, Sire," answered Bertha: "I feel that it is my right place in every way--as a humble subject in so high a presence, as a penitent, as a petitioner."

"Nay, then," cried the monarch, taking her by both hands, and raising her with gentle force, "I must make myself obeyed. Now tell me all truly, and I promise you that if I can aid or befriend

you, I will."

Bertha did tell him all, sometimes in low tones of entreaty and deprecation; sometimes with a gay smile, subdued and chastened by a tear; sometimes an irrepressible jest at herself, at the world, at woman's nature and weakness, half coquettish, half sad, would break the even course of her tale; and while she went on, the monarch listened thoughtfully, and with interest in the tale itself, but more in the person who told it.

When she had done, he answered, "I must think over this; but for your sake, sweet one, it shall have kind consideration, and I will keep my promise by those bright eyes." As he spoke, he took both her hands in his, and kissed her cheek; meditated for a moment, and still holding her firmly. But then he suddenly released her, saying, "No," as if to himself.

At that moment there was a knock at the door of the cabinet, and the Emperor said, "Come in." An attendant instantly entered, and gave him a large sealed packet, saying, "The messenger said it was of instant importance, Sire, from the Count of--."

"Well, well," cried the Emperor, waving his hand; and then, turning to Bertha, he added, "Now go back to your chamber, fair lady, where you shall be well taken care of. I will give *your* business full and kind thought, and will come and tell you the result."

"Good Heaven!" thought Bertha, as she quitted the cabinet, "What will become of me?"

But the Emperor's thoughts were salutary, and he forbore.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

At first the sleep of Adelaide of Ehrenstein--when she at length could close her eyes after the strange music which she had heard--was troubled and light. Dreams visited her again and again; the same shapes reappeared in different garbs and circumstances; and a thousand shifting imaginations crossed the darkness of the sleeping brain, and passed rapidly away, like summer lightning on a warm night. After some hours, however, more calm and refreshing slumber fell upon her, and, when she woke, the sun was shining brightly into her chamber, through the young green leaves of the vine that mantled the window. Everything looked sweet and peaceful; the song of birds came musical to her ear, and she thought that from time to time she caught the sound of a distant chant and the swelling notes of the organ. The window was half open, and the balmy breath of spring fanned her cheek as she lay, while by her side sat the lady whom she had seen the night before, now gazing at her with the look of a tender mother watching a sick child. It was full of deep affection, yet melancholy, very melancholy; and who can gaze upon a young and inexperienced being just about to enter upon the thorny path of mature life--who, with a knowledge of all that experience teaches, the disappointments, the sorrows, the anxieties, the pangs, the agonies that await mortal man upon his strange career, can watch the young lie sleeping all unconscious of the evil to come, and not feel sad at heart to think that in such a bitter school they must learn the great lessons that prepare for immortality?

"Thou hast slept well, my child," said the lady, as soon as she saw that Adelaide was awake. "I trust that thy weariness has passed away?"

"Yes, dear lady," answered Adelaide; "but not my fears. I heard horsemen pass by last night, and voices singing, and had not my whole senses been dulled by fatigue, so that even very terror could not take hold upon them, I believe I should have lain here and watched the whole night through, thinking that every sound betokened pursuit."

"Have no fear, for there is no danger, dear one," said the lady. "I will show you, when you have risen, how easy escape would be, even if those whose pursuit you fear were aware of your place of refuge, and sought you here. We have a sure sanctuary close at hand. I will leave you now for a while, and then I will lead you to the chapel to praise God for your deliverance last night."

Adelaide rose, and dressed herself, though not very quickly; for her limbs still felt stiff and bruised; and often, too, she would pause and think, gazing from the window into the little garden that surrounded the house, and feeling the peaceful influence of the scene, bring balm and refreshment to her heart. At length, when she was ready, she opened the door, and looked out where the neat woman servant was arranging all the little articles of furniture in the passage; and, while the maid ran to call her mistress, Adelaide could not prevent her thoughts from contrasting strongly the tranquil life of that humble cottage with the haughty state and troublous energy of her father's castle. Peace!--it is peace that the pure heart ever longs for; and every spot where fancy teaches us to believe it rests--the village, in its mantle of green trees--the cottage,

with its humble thatch and curling smoke--the cloister, the very hermitage, wherever imagination places it, seems better far, however lowly, than the highest and most splendid scene without that good and holy tenant.

Her reverie lasted not long; for, coming down the narrow stairs, with the fair hand resting on the dark old oak, the lady joined her guest in a few moments; and then, in a kind and tender tone, she said, "Come; it is fit that we should thank God for all things. Had we light to see, everything on earth is a blessing--except sin. There may be sorrow; but there is no evil but wickedness. Come, my child."

"I am ready, and quite willing," answered Adelaide, following; and the lady led her on along the passage to the back of the house, where appeared a low arch, and a heavy door covered with iron plates. It was not locked; but, as soon as it was drawn open, Adelaide beheld a ponderous key and manifold bolts and fastenings within, and another door beyond, while overhead, between the two, was a space open to the air, but above which hung the lower edge of an iron portcullis ready to descend. The lady saw her young companion's eyes turned up, and answered her thoughts by saying, "The touch even of so weak a hand as mine upon the machinery behind this other door will cause that gate to descend in an instant, and cut off all communication between this cottage and the convent garden. Thus, you see we have a sure escape always nigh." As she spoke, she opened the other door, and Adelaide following her as she advanced, found herself in the garden of the convent of Heiligenstein. It was a calm and thoughtful-looking place, surrounded by high walls of massive masonry, which towered up almost to a level with the tops of the old trees. Of these there were many; beeches and oaks, and elms, with here and there a dark yew, contrasting strongly and solemnly with the light green foliage of the rest. They were, nevertheless, not planted thick together; but each tree stood detached, shadowing its own spot of ground; and beneath the branches no brushwood was suffered to grow, nor weeds to encumber the earth. The lower boughs, too, were cut away, to the height of six or seven feet up the stem, so that those who wandered in the garden in the summer could sit or stand in the cool shade, and meditate at their leisure. The ground was generally covered with soft turf; but there were many paths of pebbles laid side by side, and here and there was a bed of such simple flowers as then ornamented the gardens of Europe. Except where some of the nuns were seen walking two and two, and speaking together in a low tone,--or where a solitary sister stood cultivating some one particular bed which she had taken under her especial care, all was still as death; and the only thing that seemed endued with life and energy was the little stream, which, entering from the hill above, flowed through the convent garden.

The nuns nodded kindly to the lady when she passed any of them, and gazed on Adelaide with inquiring eyes, turning the one to the other, and talking glibly. The outward world visited them too rarely for even an occasional glance of one of its denizens not to afford matter for busy speculation. The young lady of Ehrenstein and her conductor, however, went on in silence, under the green old quiet trees, and over the soft cool turf, towards a pile of building with long curved windows, ornamented in a lighter style than the rest of the convent. Under a low, but wide-spreading tree, was a pointed door, apparently ever open, and through it the two passed into the chapel. It was lofty, if not spacious; and there was an air of misty gloom spread through it which disposed the heart to prayer, while through the stained glass windows of the chancel streamed a red and yellow light, as if from the glories of a world beyond this life. Advancing slowly to a chapel dedicated to "Our Lady of Good help," Adelaide's new friend bent her knees, and offered up the prayer of the heart. Adelaide knelt down also, and, though she spoke not aloud, her lips moved, and thanks and praise, and entreaty, rose up from before that altar to the Giver of all good, and the Protector from all evil. She felt more comfort and refreshment from that prayer than sleep or food had given; and, when she rose, her thought was, "One can bear much, with hope and faith in God."

She was yet destined, and that speedily, to need such support; but we must turn to what had been passing elsewhere, but not far off. When the mistress of the little cottage beneath the convent walls had left her dwelling with her fair guest, all was quiet and peaceful; the careful maid was busily engaged in the small entrance hall, brushing the dust from the rare old furniture, raising, as she did so, a thin cloud of motes, that went dancing away in a long line of sunshine which streamed through the open door. The other servant was preparing breakfast for her lady, on her return. Nought stirred in the garden but the lizard on the wall, and the gay birds moving amongst the leaves of the vines. The two ladies could not have reached the chapel, however, when a head was raised over the garden wall at the corner farthest from the entrance. Had there been doubt or suspicion, no eye would have been turned in that direction; for there the moat that enclosed the ground was broad and deep; and, whoever it was, who now gazed quickly round that quiet little spot, he must have found some means, by plank or ladder, of crossing the wide ditch. The maids in the house continued their work, unconscious; no one saw the intruder, no ear caught any sound of his proceedings; and, after having made his furtive examination of the premises, he raised himself upon his arms, swung himself over the wall, and, dropping down within the limits of the garden, hid himself behind the vines. A moment after, another head appeared; but the proceedings on this occasion were shorter than before. There was no long scrutiny of the ground; but, leaping over at once, this new visitor took up his position beside his companion. A third, a fourth, followed; and Heaven knows how many more might have thus poured in unperceived, had not a sudden ringing of the bell been heard at the garden-gate, which as the reader is aware, lay on the other side of the house, towards the village. So loud and sharp was the sound, that the maid who was in the passage ran out at once, and drew back the little

wooden screen from the wicket. The face that presented itself was that of one of the peasants of the neighbouring village; and it was full of anxiety and apprehension.

"There are men getting over into the garden," he cried; "and a number more down beyond the corner of the wood. Run and tell the good lady."

The woman turned round, with a scream; for the first glance to the opposite side showed her three or four persons running from the far angle of the garden. Darting back into the house, she rushed along the passage, and through the doors which led to the convent. In her terror, she said not a word to her fellow-servant; but the moment she was within the convent-garden, she cast off the chain that upheld the portcullis, and it fell with a tremendous clang, cutting off the grounds of the nunnery from the cottage built against their walls.

In the mean time, three of the men had entered the dwelling where Adelaide had taken refuge the night before, and were searching it in no very ceremonious manner; while the fourth rushed to the garden gate, threw it open, and, running round to the angle, from which he could see the neighbouring wood, took off his steel cap, and waved it over his head as a signal to some persons at a distance. The moment after, a large party of horse drew out from amongst the trees, and rode up at a quick pace towards the cottage. A circumstance had occurred, however, which the leader of that party had wished to avoid; for the Count of Ehrenstein, though, as we have shown, a man of strong and violent passions, was more cautious, both by habit and by nature, than is usual with persons of his disposition. The peasant who had given the alarm to the good woman at the cottage instantly hurried to the great gates of the monastery, rang the bell, spoke a few words to the portress, and then ran away to the village.

In a minute or two after, the great bell of the convent rang loud and clear, sending the deep waves of sound far over forest and field, giving notice to a great distance round, that the nuns of Heiligenstein were in danger, and required aid. Ere it had rung for three minutes, the Abbess and several of the sisters appeared on the battlemented portal of the gate, and made signs to some of the horsemen who were now surrounding the cottage garden, expressive of a desire to speak with them. No notice was taken for some time; but at length, with a moody and disappointed brow, the Count of Ehrenstein himself came out from the cottage, with a number of men who had entered with him, and springing on his horse, rode up direct to the gates of the convent.

He seemed about to speak, but the Abbess, as well aware as any woman of the advantage of the first word in a dispute, exclaimed, before he could open his lips, "What seek you here, bold man; and how dare you enter, like a thief, the grounds and dependencies of this convent?"

"I seek for my own, my good lady and mother," replied the Count of Ehrenstein, "and will take it wherever I find it, by fair means, if peaceably yielded--by force, if withheld. You seem not to know me, though we have seen each other before; and what you have heard of me should make you understand that I am not one to be trifled with. You have my daughter within these walls; that fact I have learned beyond all doubt. Bring her out to me within five minutes, and all shall go well. I will take off my bonnet, like a good and humble servant of the Church, and thank you right courteously. But if you do not, my men with their axes will, in half an hour, hew down these gates of yours, and I will take boldly what I now ask reverently, though the night and a wolf or two may find their way in through the holes I am obliged to make."

"This is all pretence," answered the Abbess. "You seek to plunder the convent. I have never seen your daughter since she was an infant; and you forge your cause of complaint, Count of Ehrenstein, in order to commit violence against a body of women whom you think helpless. But, thank God and our holy Mother, we are not without defence; and if you attempt to touch the gates, the consequences be upon your own head. Bid the men come up there, sister Louisa, and garnish the walls. I take Heaven to witness, that if blood be shed, it is this man's doing, for he seeks a vain pretence against me."

One of the nuns here whispered a few words to the Abbess, and the Abbess replied with an impatient gesture; but in the mean time, at a signal from above, a number of men, armed in haste, with cross bows in their hands, began to hurry up, their heads and shoulders appearing at various parts of the wall, and over the battlements of the portal. At the same time, the great bell, which had ceased while the Abbess and the Count were speaking, commenced again its loud peal, and a crowd of people were seen hurrying down from the hills beyond, while several parties appeared running with whatever arms they could collect, from the farther end of the village to a postern behind the convent. Every thing, in short, seemed to promise, that there would speedily take place one of the scenes so common in those days, when nunnery or abbey was attacked by any of its unruly neighbours, and defended successfully or unsuccessfully, not alone by the vassals, who were bound by their tenure to serve in arms, but also by the peasantry, who had generally many motives for gratitude and kindly feeling towards the ecclesiastics and recluses who dwelt among them.

The enterprise, however, seemed now somewhat more serious in the eyes of the Count of Ehrenstein than he had previously expected. The words of the Abbess were bold and resolute; her declaration that she had not seen his daughter since she was an infant, had been spoken in a frank and straightforward tone; the number of men who already crowded the walls was considerable, and more were likely soon to arrive. Besides this, the reputation of attacking a nunnery was not altogether that which the Count of Ehrenstein could have desired; and he felt

that he could be by no means certain of what acts his soldiers might commit, to bring down discredit on his name, even if he should be successful.

These considerations made him hesitate; and spurring his horse somewhat nearer to the gate, he said, "Lady Abbess, it is quite possible my disobedient child may be here without your knowledge or consent. I wish to do nothing rashly, wrongly, or unjustly; and to show you that I am not using a false pretence to violate your rights, although I have certain information that she is now here, I will give you half an hour to seek for her, and bring her forth, provided you stop the ringing of that bell. If you do not bring her forth within that time, I must use my own right, and take her."

The Abbess made no reply, but waved her hand, with an angry and somewhat scornful expression; and, accompanied by the nuns, withdrew from the walls, leaving them guarded by the armed men who had been admitted.

The first care of the Count of Ehrenstein was to prevent the entrance of any more; and he accordingly detached a small party to guard the postern at the back of the convent. He then held a conversation with Seckendorf and old Karl von Mosbach, and, although the bell still continued to ring, he delayed the threatened attack, withdrawing his men out of the reach of the crossbows, and watching, with somewhat anxious eyes, the progress of the peasantry who were coming down the hills, and who, when they saw the postern guarded by his horsemen, gathered in one body of considerable strength upon the nearest slope. When about twenty minutes had elapsed, some movements towards the attack might be observed amongst his soldiery; several small trees were cut down, and shaped into various implements with the axe. Twelve stout men dismounted, and were formed in two lines before the rest; and, judging by these signs, that more active operations were about to commence, the cross-bowmen on the walls might be seen fitting their quarrels to the string; and some of them seemed marking out the principal figures amongst the assailants for the first shot.

Before they proceeded further, however, the Count once more rode forward to the gate, whispering a word before he went to old Karl von Mosbach, who immediately led five or six men round to the cottage garden, and disappeared amongst the vines.

The Count, as soon as he was within hearing, called to a burly yeoman, who seemed in command above the gate, and bade him send for the Abbess, as he wanted to speak with her again. A few minutes elapsed before she appeared; but as soon as she came forward, the Count addressed her, saying, "You have now, Lady Abbess, had full time to inquire and learn whether my child be within your gates or not. You know well that she is. I see it on your face; and I, as her father, summon you to bring her forth, and yield her to my lawful authority. If not, the evil consequences, whatever they may be, rest upon your head, not mine; for you dare not and cannot deny that she is at this moment in the convent."

The countenance of the Abbess--it was a venerable and amiable one, though somewhat touched with pride--was certainly troubled; but still she replied boldly, and at once, "Your daughter, my lord the Count, is at the altar of Our Lady of good help, and that is *sanctuary*. I knew not, when I spoke to you before, that she was within these walls; but even had I known it, I must have refused to give her up. I no more dare to take her from sanctuary than you do; and therefore I tell you to withdraw your men from these gates,--to return home to your own dwelling, and to leave this holy place in peace."

"Away with such idle words!" cried the Count, furiously; "what sanctuary shall shield a child from her father, whom she has offended? Will you bring her forth at once, or I will fire your convent and your sanctuary together? Advance, Seckendorf!"

"Take but one step towards these gates, and the deepest curses of the church shall fall upon you all," cried the Abbess. "What, shall not the sanctuary, which gives safety even to the homicide, with his fellow's blood red upon his hand, shield an innocent child from the fury of her rash and violent father? Bend your bows, my children, and defend these holy walls to the last, if they be attacked."

"On, Seckendorf, on!" cried the Count, waving his hand; but the old knight rode forward alone, while a quarrel from one of the cross-bows, discharged by somewhat too eager a hand, rang upon his casque.

"There is a trumpet, my lord the Count," said the good old soldier, paying no more attention to the missile than if it had been a snow-ball thrown by a boy in sport; "better see who is coming, before we begin: if they be friends, they will help us; if enemies, it were well not to let them take us in the flank."

The Count looked round, with a gloomy brow, and a fierce rolling eye, in the direction towards which Seckendorf had pointed. No one was yet visible; but the woods and hills screened the roads round about till they came very near the village; and the sounds of a trumpet was heard again, clear and distinct, mingling shrilly with the low dull peal of the great bell of the convent.

"Help is at hand!" cried the Abbess. "Bold man, you will repent this:" and, almost as she spoke, two figures appeared at the opening of the road that led away towards Spires. One was a

gentleman of the middle age, unarmed, but mounted on a powerful charger. The other was a monk, if one might judge by his garments, riding a mule well nigh as spirited as a horse.

"Father George, I think," cried Seckendorf; "but who is that with him? There are more behind."

The next instant the head of a troop of horse was seen, with several officers in arms, a herald, two trumpeters, and a banner; and, as two and two the men-at-arms issued forth, at a quick pace, the Count of Ehrenstein soon perceived that his own force was far inferior.

"Gather the men together, Seckendorf," he cried; "call Mosbach and his men out of the cottage; bring the party back from the postern there, and secure that road by the left of the village. We must retreat. Who, in the fiend's name, can these be?"

"It is an imperial banner, Sir," answered the old knight, ere he rode back to the troop to execute the orders he received.

In the mean while the other party advanced rapidly: they crossed the little stream, were lost for a minute behind an orchard,--their heads and shoulders, banners and lances, were then seen over the walls of the cottage-garden; and in another moment the officer in command halted his men within fifty yards of the convent gate. After a few words to those behind, he pushed his horse forward, accompanied by Father George, and followed by the herald and one of the trumpeters. "What is all this?" he cried, in a loud, stern tone: "why is the alarm bell of this holy place ringing so loud? and what are these armed men doing before the walls of Heiligenstein?"

"The Count of Ehrenstein comes to force a penitent from the sanctuary of our Lady's altar," cried the Abbess, waving her hand for the bell to cease; "and he was about to force our gates and burn the convent. Thank God! and all the saints, for your coming, noble Count."

"I am here, Count Rudolph of Schönborn," said the Count of Ehrenstein, riding a little forward, and smoothing his brow, "to claim my disobedient daughter at the hands of these good sisters, who do not deny that she is within their walls; and it was certainly my determination to take her hence, with as little force as might be, upon their refusal to give her up upon the pretence of sanctuary. I trust that you, as a father yourself, and a brother noble, will aid me to make this reverend lady hear reason,--for who ever knew of sanctuary protecting a refractory child from her parent's due authority?"

"I know no limit to the shelter of a sanctuary, my good lord," replied Count Rudolph. "Even I, myself, though now armed with the Emperor's authority, must respect it, as you will soon see. As to forcing the gates of a holy place like this, and threatening to burn it down, even as a menace, it is a high offence, my lord."

"A usual one with this noble Count," said Father George, "as I showed the Emperor this morning."

"Ha, poisonous reptile!" cried the Count of Ehrenstein, giving way to a burst of fury; "have you been spitting your venom so far from your own den? Who made my child--the sweetest, gentlest girl that ever lived--despise her father's authority, fly from her home, and wed a beggarly outcast? Who prompted his brother's bastard to seduce from her duty the daughter of his lord? But there is vengeance yet in store."

"My lord the Count," replied Father George, calmly, "I might put questions to you more difficult to answer than these will prove to me. When you ask them in fit presence, as I believe you will soon have occasion, I am ready to reply; but the matter is now in other hands, and there I will leave it for the time."

"I will leave my cause with you in no other hands," answered the Count of Ehrenstein, fiercely; "sooner or later I will have vengeance. It were vain now, I see," he continued, turning to Count Rudolph, "to try to enforce my right here to the custody of my own child, as you, sir, refuse to give me aid; and therefore----"

"Stay yet a moment, my lord of Ehrenstein," said Count Rudolph; "my whole mission refers to you: and, first, as to your daughter, you had better witness what steps I take. My dear lady Abbess," he continued, advancing close to the gates, "I was commanded by the Emperor, my lord and friend, to seek the lady Adelaide, of Ehrenstein, here, and to bring her to the Imperial Court at Spires, there to live, under my good wife's protection, till her case can be fully considered. As, however, she has claimed sanctuary, far be it from me even to think of taking her from it without her free consent. Give her, therefore, my message, and tell her, that if she be willing to go with me, I pledge my knightly word, at any time that she may require it, to restore her to her place of refuge, and defend her there against all men."

"I will tell her, my lord," replied the Abbess, "and doubtless she will readily go with one so noble and so true."

"I will not stay here," cried the Count of Ehrenstein, "to be mocked and set at nought by my rebellious child.--Mount the men, Mosbach, and march."

"One moment more, my lord," said Count Rudolph; "I was bound for Ehrenstein, had I not so fortunately found you here; so that I am saved a farther journey. You are accused, my lord, before the Imperial Chamber, of several high offences, and----"

"And you are ordered, perhaps, to arrest me," said the Count, reining back his horse towards his troop: "be it at your own peril,--I am not very tame."

"You mistake, sir," said Count Rudolph; "I am ordered formally to summon you to appear to-morrow before the Emperor's court at Spires; there to answer any charges that may be brought against you. Advance, herald, and read the summons."

The herald immediately spurred forward his horse, till he was somewhat in advance of Count Rudolph and Father George, and then, drawing forth a parchment with a large seal, he read aloud, in a dull and monotonous voice, a formal summons for the Count of Ehrenstein to appear, as Count Rudolph had announced. After he had concluded, he waved his truncheon thrice in the air, and each time the trumpeter behind blew a loud short blast.

"And now, my good lord, I may as well ask whether you will appear, or not?" said Count Rudolph, as soon as this ceremony was over.

"I love to have time to consider all things," answered the Count of Ehrenstein. "To-morrow will be time enough for my determination to appear: and now, my lord, farewell. I trust your daughter may prove as obedient as mine, and may find friends, as wise and powerful as yourself, to aid and encourage her in the course she chooses."

Thus saying, with a bitter smile, and every angry passion in his heart, the Count of Ehrenstein turned his horse and rode away, his retainers following, and old Seckendorf keeping a wary eye to the rear, lest any attack should be made upon their retreating party, either by the force of Count Rudolph, or the armed peasantry who had gathered on the hill.

CHAPTER XL.

It is a common maxim that time destroys falsehood, and leaves truth intact. This may be true in the abstract; for truth, in its nature is indestructible; but as the mind of man is always more or less in a misty state, and his perception of no object very clear and distinct; even that which is true in the abstract he often renders false in application by various errors of his own, and by none more frequently than by using that in a figurative sense which is only just in a definite sense. No maxim has thus been more perverted than the one I have cited, that time destroys falsehood, but leaves truth intact. It has been used figuratively; it has had its signification extended; it has had its very terms altered; and we find it at last changed so as to assert that time destroys falsehood, but brings truth to light. In this form, however, it is altogether inadmissible. Time may destroy falsehood, as anything else that is perishable. It may sometimes bring truth to light; but it does neither always; and this is one of the vulgar maxims of the world, of which we have so many, intended to support morality, but, in fact, destroying it; for the key-stone of morals is truth. Society manufactures facts just as it builds houses and churches, forms rings, or swords, or bracelets. The real deeds, and thoughts, and feelings of men, and the false assertions concerning them--all, in short, that forms the great mass of history,--are cast down, broken, mutilated, and covered over with the mud and ashes of passing generations, as age follows age; but the truth lies buried as well as the falsehood; and the waves of time that overlay them with the refuse, and lumber, and dirt of a hundred centuries, from hour to hour, roll up the fragments to the feet of those who stand upon the dry strand of the present; or else man's busy and inquisitive hand digs them up; and--as we search amongst the ruins of a past city, for the gems and jewels, the sculpture and the painting of races now no more, casting from us what is worthless--so seek we amongst the records of the former times (if we are wise), preserving what is true and precious, and throwing away what is false. Yet how much useless lumber and unsubstantial trash is retained and valued in both cases. What history is not full of lies!--what cabinet uncrowded with fabrications!

Perhaps in no case whatever has time given us so little truth as in regard to many points relating to the religions institutions of the middle ages. The gross and horrible superstitions and corruptions of the Romish church, and the ambitious motives and eager thirst for domination that existed in her hierarchy, acted as a sort of deluge, overwhelming and hiding many excellent results--much that was fine--much that was holy--much that was pure. The subject is vast, and is receiving more attention now than it ever has done since the Reformation; but I have to do with only one point. The monasteries and nunneries of those days have been represented, generally, as places of mere idleness, or idleness and vice; and yet, at the periods when they were

established, and for centuries after, they operated in many respects most beneficially. They were the countercheck to feudal power and tyranny; a refuge to the people in the time of oppression; a sure support in the hour of need. There were drawbacks, certainly; they were the manufactories of superstitions, the citadels of the enemy in a fierce war against the human mind. Still they did much good, in some directions, in their day. The lives of the recluses have been severely criticised; they have, upon the faith of some shocking instances, been represented as full of wickedness and corruption; and yet in general the people loved them. There cannot be a doubt of it,--especially the people of the country; for the new risen communes were generally inimical to them.

At all events, the peasantry round the convent of Heiligenstein were devotedly attached to the good sisters, who, living amongst them, witnessed their joys and sorrows, alleviated their sufferings, wherever it was possible, and sympathised with them whenever they had no other balm to give. Simple in their lives, kind in their dealings, liberal of their wealth, for which they had no other employment but charity, and spreading those human affections which were denied an individual object over the whole race, the nuns were pardoned easily a little spiritual pride, as the alloy of the finer qualities which they constantly displayed. The armed peasants, who had hurried to their rescue, would willingly have shed their blood in defence of their friends and benefactors; and a menacing movement took place amongst them as the soldiery of the Count of Ehrenstein withdrew. A message, sent in haste by the Abbess, stopped any hostile proceeding; but a loud shout of derision, harder to bear, perhaps, than actual assault, followed the Count, and worked up his anger almost to madness.

Count Rudolph of Schönborn, turned a quick and somewhat angry glance towards them, for although a kind and noble hearted man, he was not by any means without the prejudices of his class; and he felt the indignity offered to another noble as an insult to his whole order. He might, indeed, have added sharp words to his fierce look, but the voice of the Abbess, speaking from above, caught his ear, and he advanced, inquiring, "What says the Lady Adelaide?"

"I have not given her your message yet, my good lord," was the reply; "I stayed to see what would happen to that bad Count of Ehrenstein. But I have ordered the gates to be thrown open for you, my noble lord, and refreshment to be prepared for your men, in the village. You had better see the lady yourself, poor thing. Doubtless, her father's harsh, bad temper has driven her to fly from him. He killed her mother, who was as sweet a girl as ever lived, and my dear friend, in childhood."

"Killed her!" exclaimed Count Rudolph in surprise.

"Nay, she means but by unkindness, my lord Count," replied Father George. "There are murders which no law but that of God will reach; but I cannot but think, that to slay the innocent and good by daily torture, cold looks, harsh words, and deeds bitterer than blows, is as great or greater a crime than to end life quickly by the dagger or the phial. But see, my lord, the gates are open. Will you not enter? I shall beg leave to accompany you within, for my words may have more power with the lady than those of a stranger, however noble."

"We must not be long," answered Count Rudolph; and advancing to the gates, he entered the outer court of the convent where the Abbess stood ready to receive him, with all marks of gratitude and respect. She did not, indeed, lead him to the interior of the building, but took her way to the parlour of the lodge, where she ordered refreshments to be brought instantly, and then, at the request of the Count, sent for poor Adelaide of Ehrenstein. Father George she seemed to know well, and though they were too courteous to converse apart in Count Rudolph's presence, their looks held a mute conversation, till, at length, the door of the parlour again opened, and Adelaide appeared, clinging with unsubdued terror to the lady with whom she had found refuge, whose face also was grave and apprehensive. The sight of Father George, however, seemed to revive and encourage them both. Adelaide at once sprang towards him and kissed his hand, and the lady greeted him with a bright and well satisfied smile. To the one, his manner was kind and paternal; to the other, reverent and courteous; but Adelaide, ere she even looked round to Count Rudolph, whispered, "Ferdinand, Father? Ferdinand? I have not seen him."

"He is safe, my child," said the old monk, in a low tone; "fear not; the crisis is coming; and you will now find that the promises I made are fulfilled. You have still to play your part, my child; but look upon it as a blessing from Heaven, that you have the opportunity of playing that part, and I trust of saving those most dear to you."

"Have you told the lady?" asked Count Rudolph, interrupting the monk, as he was going on.

"No, my good lord," answered Father George, "I have not ventured to give your message in your own presence."

Count Rudolph advanced towards Adelaide, and with a graceful, though somewhat stately air, he said, "Your case, lady, has come before my lord the Emperor in two forms: first, by private information from a source in which he seems to have some confidence; and next, by an open statement, made this morning, a few minutes before I set out--and of which, by the way, I know nothing--by my reverend and very good friend here, Father George. His Imperial Majesty seems to have been greatly touched by the account given to him, and he despatched me in haste to request your presence at his court at Spire. To satisfy any doubts that you might have, he

required me to assure you of the protection and motherly care of my good wife, the Countess Schönborn, which she will give you, I may say, willingly and frankly, as if you were a child of her own. The Emperor knew not, when he sent me, that you had taken sanctuary, and thus he spoke in the tone of command; but being well aware that no one has greater reverence for the church than he, I dare use nothing but entreaty now, assuring you, upon my knightly word and honour, that at your request, I will restore you to this place of refuge, and there defend you to the best of my power, should it be needful."

Adelaide paused, and made no reply for a moment, looking to Father George, as if for counsel. "Go, my child, go," he said. "Great things are on the eve of decision in the Emperor's court. It is needful that you should be present; for it often happens that a woman's voice, wisely employed, mitigates the severity of man's justice, and acts the sweetest part of Heaven on earth; go, my child, go. With this good lord's inviolable word to guard you, you are as safe at Spires as here."

Adelaide gently clasped her hands together, and looked down upon the ground for a moment or two, lost in deep thought. It was not that she hesitated, it was not that she asked herself, "Shall I, or shall I not, quit this place of sure and peaceful refuge, to mingle again with the strifes and confusion of the world?" for her mind was made up; and, thus far advanced, she was ready to go on. But it was that she saw many a painful hour before her, and she asked herself, "How shall I surmount all the anguish and the difficulty of the hour? Will my courage fail, will my bodily strength give way? Will God help me at my need, and strengthen me to do his appointed task?" As she thus thought, her hands pressed closer together, and her lips murmured, "Christ help me!" Then turning to Count Rudolph, she said, "I am ready to go, my lord, in obedience to the Emperor's command, and trusting to your word."

She did not venture to say more, and Count Rudolph showed some inclination to depart; but the Abbess besought him to pause awhile, till both he and the lady had partaken of some refreshment. To speak the truth, he was not averse to a supply of good meat and wine; for he had ridden far, and was at all times blessed with a good appetite. He made Adelaide his excuse, however; and while he courteously complimented her in somewhat formal speeches, according to the custom of the day, Father George spoke eagerly, but apart, to the lady who had been Adelaide's hostess, and then called the Abbess to their consultation. Like a hill-side under cloud and sunshine, the cheek of the lady glowed and turned pale by turns, as she listened to the words which the monk spoke. She gazed down upon the ground, she looked up to the sky, her eyes filled with tears, her limbs trembled; and ere she answered, she sat down upon a settle, as if overpowered by what was said.

"This is foolish and weak," she exclaimed, at length. "I will not shrink from the task, and why should I dread the peril? For him have I lived, for his sake have I endured the burden of existence, which otherwise would have long since crushed me. 'Tis but the habit of concealment and apprehension that engenders these foolish fears; and I will shake them off. Father, you tell me it is right to go, and I will go, if death should be my portion."

"Joy may be your portion, daughter," answered Father George, laying his right hand lightly, but impressively, upon her shoulder;—"joy, brighter, deeper, than you have known for years, perhaps than you have known in life--It may be so. I say not that it will; but surely, to see your son raised to the summit of your highest hopes, is sufficient motive even for a greater risk."

"It is--it is," answered the lady; "and I will go, good Father; but do not abandon me, do not leave me to meet a strange court, and scenes such as I have not seen for years, alone. I shall feel like some of the wild creatures of the woods, suddenly caught, and brought before a thousand gazing eyes."

"I will go with you, daughter," answered Father George, "for your sake, and for that dear child's; I will not leave you as long as there is aught doubtful in your fate. If wrong has been committed, it is mine; and I will abide the issue with you."

While this conversation had taken place between Father George and the lady, with the Abbess listening, and joining in from time to time, Count Rudolph had applied himself to soothe and encourage Adelaide, and he had made some progress in quieting her apprehension, when the refreshments which had been ordered were brought in. The worthy Count undoubtedly did more justice to the good fare than any of the other persons present; but he despatched his present task rapidly; and then, after pausing for a moment to see if his companions would take anything more, he rose, as a signal for departure.

Several little interludes had taken place, and all the by-play which must occur in such a scene. Lay-sisters had come in and gone out; two men had even appeared in the parlour, had received orders, and taken their departure; but the Count had paid little attention, and was somewhat surprised in the end to find that he was to have another companion besides the Lady Adelaide. He was too courteous to offer any objection, however; and in a short time the whole party were on their way to Spires.

We need not notice the incidents of the journey, which were few and of no importance. Refreshed by a night's rest, Adelaide was far less fatigued than Bertha had been the night before; but still, as they entered the city, then in its splendour and its pride, filled with a moving multitude, and displaying in its streets all the pageantry of commerce, of arms, and of royalty,

with gay cavalcades at every corner, with marching troops, with sounding trumpets, with gaily decorated booths and shops, and with innumerable human beings, all occupied with themselves, or with thoughts totally alien to her feelings, situation, and anticipations, Adelaide felt lost and abandoned in the crowd, and her heart sank with a greater feeling of desolation than ever she had felt in the wildest scenes of her own hills.

Such sensations were increased when they approached the palace, and beheld a multitude of guards and attendants, armed and on horseback, surrounding a small open space, in the midst of which was seen a magnificent charger, held by two grooms; while, with one knee bent to the ground, a man of lordly aspect, held a gilded stirrup, to which another, of the middle age, robed in royal splendour, placed his foot, and then vaulted into the saddle.

Count Rudolph reined in his horse, and the whole party halted, while the Emperor putting himself at the head of his train, rode past, merely noticing his friend and companion by an inclination of the head. As soon as the Imperial troop had marched by, Lady Adelaide was conducted to the palace, and led, by nearly the same course which Bertha had followed the night before, to two rooms which had been prepared for her. Father George followed, but paused at the door, saying, "I must seek myself lodging in the priory; but before I go, dear lady, let me tell you, I find, from the words of the Emperor this morning, that your maid Bertha is here. I learned late last night, that your party had been intercepted by one of the three men who fled; and I set off two hours before daybreak, to inquire into the fate of all. You will need your maid to attend upon you, and I will ask one of the pages to send her. Moreover," he added, in a low voice, "it is needful to know what she has said to the Emperor; not that I wish you to have any concealment from him; for he may know all; indeed, he does know all, as far as I can tell it; and it will be well for you to show him the motives on which you have acted, and to plead at once for that lenity, of which some who have offended may have great need. Now, for the present, farewell, my child, and farewell too, dear lady; I shall see you both again ere night."

Thus saying, Father George left his fair companions, and in a moment or two after, Bertha ran into the room, and threw her arms round her fair mistress, kissing her tenderly, but gazing upon the stranger who was with her in some surprise.

"Oh! dearest lady," she cried, in her usual gay tone, "I have been in sad terror about you, and about myself too, ever since we parted. I knew you were little fit to take care of yourself where you were; and I soon found I was little fit to take care of myself where I was; for Bertha in a court was quite as much lost as Adelaide in a wood; but Heaven took care of us both it seems. Yet I must hear all that, has happened to you; for by no stretch of imagination can I conceive how one so little experienced in the tangled ways of life, could get out of that forest in the night time--unless indeed, Father George came to your help; for that wild boy of a page tells me, a monk sent him to call me to you--pray, let me hear all."

"You will hear in good time, maiden," said the elder lady, somewhat gravely; "but at present, it is needful that you should tell your mistress all that has taken place between yourself and the Emperor; for we know not when he may return and call for her; and it is right that she should hear what has been said."

"Oh, I will tell what I said to him, in a minute," answered Bertha, laughing; "but I must not tell all he said to me, for that would be betraying Majesty's confidence--though it would serve him right too; for great men in furs and velvets should not try to make fools of poor girls."

"I seek not, my good Bertha," replied Adelaide, "to hear aught that he said to you. That does not concern me; but Father George seems to think that you told him much respecting me, and--"

"I told him all I knew, dear lady, and all I guessed," answered Bertha; "but it was not till he had promised me, upon his royal word, pardon for myself, and help for you, in case of need. But to my story, such as it is--first, I told him that you were lost in the wood, which I described as well as I could; and, moreover, that if you were out of it, you would be as much puzzled to find your way either through the mazes of the country or the mazes of your fate, as if you remained in. Then he asked me a great number of questions, to which I could only answer by guess--such as Whether you were really married to Ferdinand of Altenburg? and I told him, I felt very sure of it, though I did not see the ring put on with my own eyes."

Adelaide's cheek grew somewhat crimson, but the lady who was with her asked, "Well, what more?"

"Why then, Madam, he inquired," continued Bertha, "Who Ferdinand of Altenburg really was? and I told him that I fancied he was of higher rank than he seemed, and of better hopes and fortunes too."

"I think you must have omitted something, dear Bertha," said Adelaide; "for how came he to ask if I were married to Ferdinand of Altenburg, if you told him nothing of poor Ferdinand before?"

"That puzzled me as much as it does you, lady," replied Bertha; "but there were a thousand things besides that, which made me feel sure that he had got nearly as good information as I could give, from some one else. I went to him in the nun's gown, and he took me for you at first;

but when he found out the mistake, he questioned me closely, I can assure you. Amongst other things, I told him that it was high time for both you and Ferdinand to run away, inasmuch as I believed, if you had staid, my good and merciful lord, your father, would have chopped both your heads off. Then he asked if you were very handsome, and I said Not particularly; for it seemed to me that this mighty Kaiser had a great faculty of falling in love, and that if I told him how beautiful you really are, you might find it unpleasant."

"Hush! hush! Bertha," said Adelaide; "there is no fear of the Emperor falling in love with either of us. You must not mistake mere courtly words for lover's professions."

"Well, I wish I were safe out of the place," answered Bertha; "for, on my life! these courtly words are very warm ones; and as summer is hard by, the air is hot enough without them. But to my tale again I told him, in short, that I thought you were married; that I knew you had long loved; that I believed you knew who Ferdinand of Altenburg really is, as well or better than he does himself, and that I was quite sure you acted for the best in giving him your hand without your father's knowledge. On that he questioned me a long while, as to whether love would not make a woman do anything, and whether you had not listened to love instead of duty. I said No; that love would do great things, but not all, and that, whatever his Majesty might think, there were some women who would not do what they knew to be wrong, even for love."

"You said well, Bertha;--you said well," answered Adelaide, casting down her eyes thoughtfully, and questioning her own heart as to how far love had made her lend a willing ear to persuasions that took the voice of duty. But the elder lady bent her head approvingly towards the maid, and gave her a well pleased smile.

Bertha's tale was soon concluded, and for a while both the ladies mused over her account. The elder seemed not dissatisfied with what she stated had taken place, but there were parts of the maid's narrative which created some uneasy feeling in Adelaide's breast.--She had previously shrunk from meeting a monarch to whom she might be obliged to speak of feelings and actions which she would fain have left in silence for ever, although the feelings might be pure and noble, and the actions just and right; but she gathered from Bertha's words that there had been a lightness of tone in the Emperor's conversation which might well increase her apprehensions and make the timid modesty of her nature almost deviate into terror. Her cheek turned pale as she thus thought, and the watchful eye of her elder companion saw the change.

"You are somewhat faint and weary, my dear child," she said; "I wonder that the Countess of Schönborn has not yet appeared. She would doubtless procure you some refreshment."

"I can do that as well, Madam," answered Bertha, turning gaily to the door. "In the Emperor's absence, I command the buttery, and the cellar, and am humbly served, I can tell you.--Here, slave," she continued, opening the door and speaking to some one in the passage; "bring these ladies some food and wine; and be quick, if you would merit favour."

Adelaide smiled, inquiring, "Who have you there, giddy girl?"

"Oh, one who has vowed humble service this morning," answered Bertha; "and as I hope and trust his bondage will not be long, I may as well use my reign imperiously."

In a few minutes, the page whom we have seen before came in with an inferior servant bearing refreshments; but ere Adelaide and her companions had tasted much, Count Rudolph of Schönborn and his Countess were announced, and ushered in with more of the pomp and state of high station than had yet been seen in the Retscher. To the surprise of both Adelaide and her companion, it was to the latter that the Countess of Schönborn first addressed herself, and that with an air of deep deference and respect.

"Although it was to this young lady--whom I take to be the Lady Adelaide of Ehrenstein," the Countess said,--"that my husband promised my protection and support, yet, Madam, as my good friend, Father George of Altenburg, has made me acquainted with much concerning you, let me first offer you any courtesy or attention I can show."

"I may doubtless yet much need your favour, Madam," replied the lady; "and will seek it frankly, with many thanks that it is frankly offered; but, for the time, this dear child requires countenance and help, such as I ought to have power myself to give her, were it not for the wrong I suffer."

The Countess's next address was to Adelaide; but it gave the poor girl but small comfort or support; for though she wished to be kind and considerate, Count Rudolph's worthy dame knew not rightly how. Stately and ceremonious, she was not fitted to console under misfortune, or inspire confidence in difficulty. She was one of those people who are ever ready to do a real service or confer an important favour, but who make even bounty burdensome by the manner in which it is exercised. Oh, how poor and unequal is the exchange thus sought, of deference for regard! Strange, strange must be the constitution of those minds who prefer reverence to affection. Words of course, formal courtesies, were all that passed between the Lady Adelaide and her visitor, and although Heaven knows the poor girl had little pride in her nature, and her heart was as gentle as the summer air, yet such was the influence of the Countess's manner upon her that she became cold and almost haughty in demeanour. Perhaps it might do her good,

however; for deeply depressed as she was, ignorant of the fate of those she loved best, anxious and apprehensive in regard to the event of each coming hour, she required something to rouse her from her despondency, and recall her thoughts from the dreary looking forward to the future.

The Countess of Schönborn staid long, and only retired when the sound of trumpets announced the Emperor's return; but, strange as it may seem, though her demeanour had certainly not much pleased Adelaide, yet Adelaide had much pleased her. Her cold stateliness had generated the same; she herself had been reflected from Adelaide's mind as from a glass; and as she valued herself highly, she was well satisfied with the image.

"She is a dignified and high-minded young woman," said the Countess to her husband, as they went away; "and I am quite sure that, whatever men may say, she would never do aught unworthy of her rank and station."

Count Rudolph knew more of human nature than his wife; he understood the process by which the fair girl had become so different a creature in the Emperor's palace from what she had been at the convent and by the way; and he smiled, but without reply.

When they were gone, Adelaide's heart sank again; she expected each minute to be called to the presence of the monarch, and all her fears and apprehensions returned. Bertha, who knew her well, easily divined what was passing in her heart, and strove to console and cheer her, saying, "Indeed, dear lady, you, who fear no ghosts, need not fear any emperors. They are a much tamer sort of cattle than we have any notion of till we come near them--somewhat frolicsome, but no way frightful."

"Alas! my poor Bertha," answered the lady, "we have all our own particular objects of fear; and that which might reassure you, would terrify me. I am in no sportive humour myself, and I could easier bear a reproof just now than a jest."

Still no summons came: hour after hour passed by, and Adelaide began to think she was forgotten. A short visit from Father George tended in some degree to break the heavy tedium of expectation; but he remained not more than ten minutes, and during that time he was engrossed in eager and private conversation with the lady of the cottage. He was evidently hurried, and Adelaide thought she saw more agitation in his manner than she had ever before witnessed. Her fears increased; she asked herself if aught had gone wrong; if his plans, like so many other well-devised schemes, had failed; but the calm demeanour of her fair companion when he was gone, reassured her in a degree; and at length just as the light that streamed through the long windows was growing somewhat fainter, the expected summons came, and she rose to obey it.

"I would fain go with you, my dear child," said the elder lady, in her low, musical voice; "but I fear I must not on this occasion."

"I know it--I know it," answered Adelaide, "but, strange to say, I fear less now than I did a moment ago. Expectation is fear."

Thus saying, she departed, and, preceded by two officers of the palace, was conducted to the room where the Emperor awaited her. He fixed his eyes steadfastly upon her for a moment as she entered--then advanced, as she would have knelt, prevented her from doing so, and led her to a seat.

Physiognomy is generally looked upon as an idle science, not, indeed, deserving of the name. All must admit that it is an uncertain one; but yet there is something in the human countenance, whether it be in feature or in expression, or in both combined, which has its effect upon every one. We judge by it, even when we know not that we are judging; we act in consequence of its indications without being aware that we are influenced by it. The monarch, while he imagined that the girl Bertha was the daughter of the Count of Ehrenstein, had demeaned himself towards her in a very different manner from that which he now displayed towards Adelaide. It was that her appearance had produced a very different impression. There is an alchemy in a high heart, which transmutes other things to its own quality. He was calm and grave, but mild and kind; and, as he saw that his fair visitor was somewhat agitated, he soothed her tenderly, more in the tone of a father than a sovereign.

"Do not be alarmed, my dear young lady," he said: "I am neither going to speak harsh words nor ask idle questions. Your whole tale has been told to me by lips that could not lie; therefore all discussion of the past is useless. It remains but for me to do the best I can to render you happy, to right what has been done wrong, and, if a fair opportunity be given me, to temper justice, as far as possible, with mercy. With such purposes and such wishes, all I have to ask of you is, will you trust me?--will you place full confidence in me, and not act in any shape till I let you know the time is come?"

"Oh! Sire," exclaimed Adelaide, in a tone of deep gratitude, "you are too kind and too noble for me to doubt you for an instant. Command, and I will obey."

"Well, then," replied the Emperor; "be prepared in an hour's time to set out on a journey of some length. A litter shall be ready for you, as you have already had much fatigue;--and fear not," he added, seeing that she cast down her eyes thoughtfully: "you will be surrounded by friends, and guarded against all danger."

"There is a lady here with me, Sire," replied Adelaide, "whose fate, I feel, is in some way connected with mine."

"I know, I know," replied the Emperor, with a smile: "she will go with you; her presence is as necessary as your own, as doubtless you are well aware. And now, farewell. I will not keep you longer. Be ready, and fear nothing."

CHAPTER XLI.

The sky was as black as ink; not a star was to be seen through the dark veil of clouds; no moon had yet risen to shed even a faint glimmer through the heavy vapours that over spread the heaven. Woods and hills were around, and all was darkness over the scene, except where from a tall and extensive building, with six long pointed windows on either side, streamed forth a red and somewhat sombre blaze, lighting some of the larger objects in the immediate neighbourhood: the large masses of an oak, a tall projecting rock, and a crucifix of stone mounted on six steps. It was the chapel between Hardenberg and Mosbach, and the hour of midnight was nearly come. On either side of the door of the chapel stood a man-at-arms of the house of Leiningen, with a broad battle-axe on his shoulder; and the large door itself was thrown back, emitting the light, as well as the windows. Within, the scene was somewhat striking. For many years the old building had not beheld such a light, for the abbey to which it had been formerly attached, had been suppressed about thirty years before, on account of gross irregularities, and the revenues attributed, part to the Bishop of Spire, and part to the Abbey of Limburg. Doubtless it was the intention of the authorities who performed this act of severity, that the chapel, which had been a great convenience to the neighbouring peasantry, should be kept up, and service performed therein; but, as in the act of suppression, it was not distinctly specified who was to bear the expenses of its maintenance, neither of the parties who benefited by the confiscation had thought fit to undertake the task: the service ceased; the building was neglected; and ruin and dilapidation was fast taking hold of it.

Now, however, between each pair of the twelve tall columns that supported the broken roof, stood a man with a torch in his hand, the red glare of which poured over the grey stone-work, and showed even the green stains that damp winter had left upon the masonry. Just within the door stood a trumpeter with his trumpet in his hand; and at the farther end of the chapel, with one or two of his friends and attendants round him, his head somewhat bent, and his face thoughtful, stood Count Frederick of Leiningen. A little farther down, gathered together in a small knot under one of the arches, appeared four gentlemen wrapped in long, dark mantles, but bearing on their heels the gilded spurs of knighthood; and in various parts of the building, two or three other figures were seen, some with their countenances turned towards the light, some gazing forth from the windows. A number of seats were placed in a semicircle a few yards in advance of the spot where the altar had stood, and a small table with a lamp, some writing materials, and an hour-glass, appeared in front of the settles. On either hand, behind Count Frederick of Leiningen, was a small arched doorway, leading probably into the rooms where the priest's vestments used formerly to be kept, and above the altar was a round window, the stained glass of which was still perfect.

As if somewhat impatient, Count Frederick twice advanced to the table, and looked at the hour-glass, and then, turning to one of those who were with him, he observed, "It is nearly out. Think you he will not come?"

"I hear the sound of horses, my lord," said one of the persons who had been standing near the window; "he is coming now. They seem a goodly troop, by the noise they make."

Count Frederick smiled; and in a few minutes, the Count of Ehrenstein, followed by a considerable number of armed men, entered the chapel.

His face was less gloomy than it had lately been; and whatever he might feel, he greeted Count Frederick in friendly terms, but at the same time shaded his eyes with his hand, as if the glare affected them.

"Why, what a blaze!" he exclaimed; "do you not think, Leiningen, that we had better extinguish some of these torches? The Emperor, I find, is at Spire; his men are all about; and this may call attention to us and our proceedings."

"Be it as you will," replied Count Frederick; "but I have taken good care, my friend, to guard against all surprise. I have three hundred men, scattered in parties round, within the call of a trumpet."

The Count of Ehrenstein's face evidently fell, and he replied in a tone of some surprise, looking to his companions as he spoke, "Indeed!"

The Count took no notice of his exclamation, but ordered all the torches except two to be extinguished, and then, turning to the Count of Ehrenstein, inquired, "Had we not better bid the trumpeter call upon Ferdinand of Altenburg to appear? It is now midnight; you see the sand is run out."

"Let us first take our places," said the Count of Ehrenstein, thoughtfully. "These four gentlemen, I presume, are those whom you have selected?"

"They are," replied Count Frederick; "you have Mosbach I see with you, but where is my old friend Seckendorf?"

"I left him to guard the castle," replied the Count; "but here are three others, knights, and of good degree."

"Well, then, let us take our seats," said Count Frederick, "and to the judgment of these noble gentlemen refer the free decision of all that may be brought before them. You and I, my friend, taking our places with them to witness and execute their judgment, but having no voice in their decision."

Thus saying, Count Frederick moved towards one of the two seats placed in the midst of the others, courteously waving the Count of Ehrenstein to the one next to him on the right hand. It was the place of honour, but the latter would fain have declined it; for, by the position in which the several parties stood, it placed Count Frederick between himself and his followers, so that no private communication could be held by him with those whose judgment he might wish to influence. His old companion, however, courteously insisted on retaining his seat to the left, and the knights having taken their places, after some little debate on this point, Count Frederick said aloud:--

"To you, noble gentlemen, as men impartial and of true honour, we defer the cause which you will hear, calling upon you, however, most solemnly to remember your knightly oath, and to cast from your mind all prejudice, but judging solely according to your consciences in the sight of God. Now let the trumpeter go out, and call before us Ferdinand of Altenburg, according to his written word and promise. Let him be called three times; and if he appear not, let judgment go against him."

The trumpeter went forth as he was ordered, and immediately after, there was heard a loud, shrill blast, and a voice pronouncing some words which could not be distinguished within. A short space of time then elapsed, and again the trumpet sounded, and the proclamation was repeated.

No one appeared, however, and the Count of Ehrenstein muttered between his teeth, "He comes not--I knew he would not."

"Patience, patience, my good friend," said Count Frederick; "many things come when we least expect them. Let the trumpet sound again, and we shall see."

Almost as he spoke the blast was repeated, and to the surprise of all, it was instantly echoed by another trumpet.

"He has got a herald with him, the mighty prince;" said Count Frederick's jester, who was standing behind.

Little attention, however, was bestowed upon his words, for all eyes were eagerly bent forward upon the doorway of the chapel, and every ear turned to hear whether any one was approaching. The moment after, the sound of horses' feet beating the sandy road at a rapid rate, could be distinguished. They came quickly on, without pause till they reached the chapel, then halted, apparently opposite the crucifix, and a brief interval followed. Then approaching steps were heard, and the figures of several men were seen through the long aisle making straight towards the door. The first that entered, with bonnet on his head, and sword and dagger by his side, was Ferdinand of Altenburg. His look was calm and firm, his bearing was high and almost stern, and he walked on up the aisle without pause or hesitation, gazing over the faces of those before him with a steadfast and unwavering eye. Close upon his steps came four men completely armed, all except the head, which was covered only by the common velvet cap of the time; but the persons assembled round the table remarked that each in his bonnet bore three long feathers, usually the sign of knightly rank; and as the eye dropped to the heel of each armed figure, the gilded spurs buckled to the broad strap across the instep, showed that the honours of chivalry had indeed been received. Most of them were men well advanced in life; and on the faces of two were sundry scars, as if from ancient wounds; but on those two countenances the eye of the Count of Ehrenstein fixed with an eager and inquiring look, and his cheek grew pale as they came nearer and more near.

"Surely," he exclaimed at length, "I have seen you before."

Whether the two knights did not perceive that his words were addressed to them, or whether they were unwilling to reply, they spoke not; and Ferdinand of Altenburg, taking another step

forward, laid his hand upon the table, saying, in a firm, clear tone, "My lords and noble knights, I am here according to my word, to answer aught that may be brought against me, and to pray your judgment in all causes between me and this good lord here present, he and I having both pledged ourselves to abide by your decision, in whatever the one may have against the other."

"Stay, stay, bold boy!" exclaimed the Count of Ehrenstein; "the cause we have here to try, is solely my charge against you, for treason against your sworn lord."

"Not so, noble Sir," replied Ferdinand, calmly and respectfully; "such was not the tenor of my letter; therein I said that I would bow without appeal to the decree of this court in all matters between you and me, provided you would pledge yourself to do the same. To that pledge Count Frederick assented in your name, and to him appeal as witness if I speak the truth."

"You do assuredly, young gentleman," replied Count Frederick; "such were the terms of the compact."

"I have been deceived," muttered the Count of Ehrenstein, bitterly, gnawing his lower lip.

"Bird-lime! bird-lime!" said the jester, from behind.

"Well," cried the Count, after an angry pause, "it matters not. Let it go forward: you can have no cause of complaint against me; and first, as in due order, I will call for judgment upon you. What you will deny and what you will admit, I know not; but I am armed with full proof of your base treachery, should your impudence fail you here, and you deny your guilt."

"My lord, I am here," replied Ferdinand of Altenburg, "to acknowledge and to justify every act that I have done. I refuse you, however, for my judge, as you are my accuser; and I call upon these noble gentlemen to pronounce a just sentence upon me, being ready to answer every question they may ask, truly and freely, as if I were before the throne of Heaven."

"What is the charge, my lord?" said one of Count Frederick's knights, turning to the Count of Ehrenstein; "we must have it clearly stated, if you please."

"I have written it down here," said the Count of Ehrenstein: "it is this:" and he proceeded to read as follows:--"that he, Ferdinand of Altenburg, being my sworn retainer and customary man, eating my bread, and drinking my wine, and I--having the power of high and low justice in my own domains,--did, contrary to the laws and customs of the land, seduce the affections of my only daughter, Adelaide of Ehrenstein; and did with her, secretly and privately, and contrary to my knowledge and consent, contract marriage on the night of the fourteenth of this month, in the chapel of our Lady of Strangers, on the hill of Ehrenstein; and, moreover, that he, being imprisoned for judgment in my castle of Ehrenstein, did break forth thence, and fly from the award of my court; and that he did persuade and induce my daughter aforesaid to fly with him, or to follow after, to the great wrong and detriment of his sworn lord. That is the charge. I can prove it fully; and I claim judgment of death against him, according to the law."

As he spoke, he laid the paper on the table, and the knight, on his right, took it up and read it over again in silence.

"You hear the charge, Ferdinand of Altenburg," said the gentleman when he had done perusing it, "and you have expressed a determination to confess freely all that you have done. It will save us much time and trouble, if, as I read these charges over to you once again, you separately state which of them you acknowledge to be true, and which of them you deny. After you have done so, we will examine the proofs of all that you declare to be false, and then, upon the whole, hear your defence. Is there any one who can write here?"

The knights around were silent; but Count Frederick's chaplain came forward, saying, "I can, noble Sir."

"Then let me ask you, Father, to take down this young gentleman's replies," said the knight who had before spoken; and as soon as the chaplain was seated, he continued, addressing Ferdinand of Altenburg, "Do you acknowledge that you are the sworn retainer and customary man of the noble Count of Ehrenstein?"

"No, I am not," answered Ferdinand of Altenburg, in a firm and decided tone.

The Count of Ehrenstein looked round to Karl von Mosbach with a laugh, saying, "We will soon prove that."

But the knight who had spoken waved his hand impatiently, saying, "The proofs hereafter.--Do you acknowledge, Ferdinand of Altenburg, that you did seduce the affections of the Lady Adelaide of Ehrenstein, and contract marriage with her in secret, on the night of the fourteenth of this month, in the chapel of our Lady of Strangers, on the hill of Ehrenstein?"

"I did win her love," replied Ferdinand, boldly, "and I did contract marriage with her at the place and on the night you have mentioned; but neither contrary to law, nor without right, but fully justified in all I did."

"Bold, on my life!" said the Count, setting his teeth hard. "Would I had you for an hour within the walls of Ehrenstein!"

Ferdinand made no reply, and the knight, after looking over the priest till he had finished writing the answer, turned again to the paper containing the charges, and went on to inquire:--

"Did you, Ferdinand of Altenburg, being imprisoned, and awaiting judgment of the court of the Count of Ehrenstein, break forth and fly to escape the award of the said court?"

"No," answered Ferdinand, again; "I left the castle of Ehrenstein as I would leave my own house, with full right and power to do so. I was not imprisoned to await the judgment of any lawful court, but was held by very empty bonds, that I might be done to death privately, as you knight, Karl von Mosbach, knows right well."

The old soldier looked down with an embarrassed air, and played somewhat nervously with the hilt of his dagger; but Ferdinand, after having eyed him for a moment, went on, "I may as well answer the last charge at once, to save further trouble. I did not induce the Lady Adelaide to fly with me, though, as her husband and her rightful lord, I was fully entitled to take her whither I pleased; but I held no communication with her, and indeed I could not."

"What does he mean," cried Karl von Mosbach, anxious to escape from the immediate question of what was the Count's object in placing the young gentleman in confinement--"what does he mean by his not being a sworn retainer and customary man of my good lord the Count? Why, a dozen of us heard him take the oath."

"Let us proceed in order," said the other knight; and taking up the paper which the priest had written, he continued.--"Thus, then, stands the case: Ferdinand of Altenburg acknowledges that he did, as he is charged, contract marriage secretly with the Lady Adelaide of Ehrenstein; but he denies that he was then the sworn retainer and customary man of the Lord of Ehrenstein. Perhaps we had better keep this part of the charge separate from the rest, as his guilt or innocence, both in regard to the act which he acknowledges, and to all the other charges, must depend upon whether he was or was not, at the time of this marriage, what is here stated, namely, the sworn retainer and customary man of him whose daughter he secretly married. What is your proof, my Lord of Ehrenstein, that he is that which you have stated?"

"It shall be quite sufficient," answered the Count; "there are three or four men here present who have heard the oath taken by him, Ferdinand of Altenburg, when admitted to serve in arms. Here, Albert, come forward. Were you, or were you not present when that youth took the usual oath?"

A stout soldier stepped forward with some degree of reluctance apparent in his countenance and manner; but the question being repeated, he replied, "I was: we all take it."

"Repeat the precise words of the oath," said the knight.

The man rubbed his head, as if to awaken memory, and then answered, "As far as I can recollect, it was to serve my lord, in arms, well and truly, and to defend him in life and goods at the peril of his head."

Count Frederick's knights looked at each other, and the one who had been the only spokesman said, "This renders him an armed retainer in military service, but not a customary man. Where is the proof of that?"

"It is a fact of common notoriety," answered the Count of Ehrenstein, "that he for years has taken my bread and wine, and that, together with this oath, makes him my customary man."

"Nay," replied the knight; "he might be your guest, my noble lord. There is more required to show him your customary man than that. Have you given him wages or hire, fee or reward?"

"Wages or hire he has not had," answered the Count of Ehrenstein; "for he had ever money of his own; but he has had arms and horses of me."

"Fine fee or reward that," cried the jester from behind; "the means of getting his skull cracked, or breaking his neck."

"This is something in the shape of recompense, assuredly," said Count Frederick's knight, musing.

"You seem learned in the law, Sir," said the Count of Ehrenstein, with a sneer.

"I am, my good lord," answered the knight, with cold calmness. "I have studied the laws and customs of knighthood and nobility since first I buckled on my spurs, now five-and-twenty years ago; and I have often found the knowledge serviceable to myself and others, as here also it is likely to prove. But let us proceed: you have given this young gentleman arms and horses, you say, as recompense and wages for the services he has sworn to perform. It is a somewhat doubtful point whether this will render him your man; but I think it will, if--"

"Ha!" cried the Count, "what is the *if*? The case is as clear as light. He is my man; and I claim

him as such. Where is there an *if*?"

"I was about to show you," said the knight; "for there are several conditions which would bar your claim. He must have received them and acknowledged them as payment, not as a free gift, not as a loan to serve you with in war. He must be of inferior degree."

"I thank you, noble Sir," said Ferdinand of Altenburg, interposing, "for your strictness in seeing justice done me; but I will avail myself of no doubtful points of law to shield what I have done. The Lady Adelaide's love I have won, the Lady Adelaide's hand I have gained. I have done it boldly, and boldly will I justify it; denying all power in her father to judge me as his man, or to do aught but treat me as noble to noble. He has no law that can touch me; he has no authority that can bind me. I here proclaim, and by this I will abide, that by no possibility could I ever become his man, though he might become mine. Nay more, I say that his bread I have never eaten; that his wine I have never drunk; that his horses or arms have I never received; that to the Count of Ehrenstein have I taken no oath."

"The youth is mad," exclaimed the Count; and all present looked from one to the other with surprise, as boldly and even vehemently Ferdinand of Altenburg poured forth such startling assertions.

"Ay, he is mad enough," said old Karl von Mosbach; "that is clear."

"Pray, good youth," said the Count, with a look of contemptuous pity, "by what title have you fed in my castle, ridden with my band, or used my arms, and in what position do you stand as to the oath between us?"

"As your sovereign lord," replied Ferdinand of Altenburg, in a clear distinct voice. "As the head of your house, the chief of your name; and you as my poor kinsman without wealth, or land, or station. The bread I ate, the wine I drank, was mine, from my own fields and vineyards; the horses, arms, are all my own. The castle in which you held me was mine, and Ferdinand of Ehrenstein is not come here so much to answer your vain charge, as to claim his own. Whisper not to Mosbach, my good uncle, with so pale a cheek. The troops with which you so carefully surrounded me here this night, thinking--if those noble knights acquitted me--to secure your prey in violation of your word, are prisoners and disarmed; and Mosbach can do nothing of all that you would wish him. Ay, noble Count Frederick, you may well gaze at him with surprise; for though you doubted some foul play, as I judged by the precautions you had taken, you know not the extent of the treachery, and that every vassal from the lands of Ehrenstein, far outnumbering your parties, have been drawn round us, like a net to catch the deer. But his craft has fallen upon his own head; and the castle, which he thought secure when he left it, is now beyond his power. He stripped it of all that could defend it, and now it is safe enough; but in other hands."

At this last intimation the Count of Ehrenstein startled up and laid his hand upon his sword, with his eyes flashing fire, and exclaiming, "Liar and villain! do you come here with such an idle tale, trumped up by your crafty uncle, to thrust his brother's bastard into the patrimony of a noble house. I can prove that you are the child of Charles of Altenburg. Out upon it! Listen not to him, noble knights; but proceed to judgment on this foul calumniator. Count Frederick, my noble friend, you will not doubt me, I am sure. I brought with me but what force was needful to guard me in these troublous times, and if that youth has dared with any hands--perchance the remnants of Eppenfeld's force--to--"

"I will confound you in a moment!" cried Ferdinand of Altenburg, in a loud voice. "Ho! without there! Bring in the Baron of Eppenfeld. Now, Sir, if, in your heart, there be secrets connected with this man that you would have concealed; if you have plotted, collocated, deceived with him; if, for dark and secret purposes, you obtained him as your prisoner from your noble friend there, and then, having driven your bargain with him, set him free to commit fresh crimes--tremble, I say; for every long-hidden act is about to be made manifest. Deep, deep, did you think them covered by the blackest shade of night; but, thanks to the care and foresight of the eyes that were upon you, they have all been gathered and recorded so as to leave you no escape. Every foul crime of the last twenty years shall now be blazoned to the eyes of the world; and your charge against your brother's son, shall be the spell that dissolves even the silence of the tomb."

"Stay, stay," exclaimed Count Frederick of Leiningen, as the Count of Ehrenstein sank back, pale and quivering, against the column behind him. "These are bold assertions, young gentleman; and should be proved calmly and deliberately; perhaps were better proved more privately and temperately."

"What! shall I be temperate when my father's blood cries out for vengeance," exclaimed Ferdinand; "shall I be temperate when my mother's voice rises from the depth of the waters, and demands punishment on her murderer? Proved! my Lord Count; I call upon you as knight, and noble, true, and loyal--and such I hold you to be, if ever yet man was so--to say here, in presence of all, if, in the castle of Eppenfeld, you did not find, if even now you do not hold in your hands, the proofs of this man's treachery towards his brother's wife and child?"

"Thus adjured, I must not deny it," answered Count Frederick, in a firm but sad tone. "I did find proofs indubitable, that the late Count of Ehrenstein, left behind him a widow, an Italian lady of high rank, and one boy--who might now be of the age of this young man; and, moreover, that

practices most terrible had been used against their lives."

"Still we shall need evidence to show that this young gentleman is the child so left," said the knight who had chiefly conducted the proceedings of the court, on the charges against Ferdinand of Altenburg. "If he can bring forth proof of that fact, of course the accusation against him falls to the ground."

"And I can bring such proof," replied Ferdinand. "Here are my witnesses beside me."

As he spoke, two of the armed men who had accompanied him, advanced, and the elder laid a paper on the table saying, "I tender a copy of proofs of marriage between Ferdinand Charles, Count of Ehrenstein, and the Lady Eleanore Sforza, laid before the Imperial chamber, and registered after examination; and also of the birth of one son, baptized by the name of Ferdinand, issuing from the same marriage."

"And I tender proofs," said the other knight, "of the arrival of the same lady and her child at Nuremberg, in the month of August, 14--."

"We are witnesses to the marriage, to the baptism of the child, and to the passing of the same lady and her son, as far as Augsburg, in the month of September, in the year preceding," said one of the two elder knights, who had not yet spoken; "and that at that time she went under the assumed name of Meissen."

"I will now call farther witnesses," said Ferdinand, in a lower tone than he had yet used, and gazing with feelings difficult to define upon the bowed figure of the Count, as he sat, apparently almost crushed to the earth with the torrent of discovery and disgrace which had poured upon him, "and God is my witness that I do all this with deep regret. But though the task is a bitter one, yet it must be accomplished. First, I will call the Baron of Eppenfled to show--"

"Stay," cried the Count, rousing himself by a great effort; "young man, you play your part boldly, so boldly that I--even I am inclined to believe, you credit the tale you tell. I know you well, Ferdinand of Altenburg, and am aware that you are not by nature a good dissembler. Either you must have faith in what you say, or you must have learned the great trade of the world quickly."

"Grace after meat is a good rule," cried the jester, "but I never yet did hear of so much grace after a bad supper."

"Nevertheless," continued the Count of Ehrenstein, without heeding the interruption, "this cause cannot be judged by this court. Long and close examination, thorough scrutiny of every proof, and the presence of men well versed in the law, is ever required to convey rich lands and lordships from a possessor of well nigh twenty years to a new upstart claimant, first heard of but yesterday."

"It required fewer formalities, it seemed," said the jester, "to convey his head from his shoulders, though, after all, to my thinking, a man's head is his best possession, for without it he will want the chief of his title-deeds."

"Pshaw!" cried the Count, "this is no jesting matter. I boldly pronounce this claim to be false and fabricated, and I appeal to the court of the Emperor."

He spoke in a loud and resolute tone; and instantly a voice from the farther part of the chapel answered, "So be it!"

The view down the nave had been obstructed by the forms of Ferdinand and his four companions; and since he had entered, a number of persons, retainers of the two Counts and others, had gathered round to hear the proceedings; but at the sound of that voice every one turned his head, and then drew somewhat back. A lane was formed--the light of the two torches farther down streamed through--and a tall figure was seen advancing with slow and stately steps towards the place where the judges sat.

CHAPTER XLII.

Count Frederick of Leiningen immediately rose from his seat, gazing forward, as the figure we have described advanced up the nave of the chapel; and, at the same time, a number of voices exclaimed, "The Emperor! the Emperor!" Though several steps before any of his attendants, however, the Emperor was not alone. The clanging step of armed men was heard behind him; knights, officers, and soldiers were seen pouring in at the doors of the chapel; a great part of the

lower end of the nave, and both the aisles behind the columns were crowded with forms, faintly seen in the dim glare of the two torches; and nought was left vacant but a space of about twenty feet in front of the spot where the judges sat. The face of the Count of Ehrenstein turned deadly pale; and his look was certainly not one of satisfaction at the speedy opportunity afforded of trying the appeal he had just made. A smile of joy beamed upon the lip of Ferdinand of Altenburg, as he drew back with those who had accompanied him, to allow the monarch to pass; but old Karl von Mosbach, though every one else rose, still kept his seat, with his teeth chattering in his head, as he gazed round, and saw all means of escape cut off by the armed men who crowded the chapel.

With a firm, proud step, and eyes bent sternly forward, his bonnet and plume upon his head, and his mantle thrown back from his shoulders, the Emperor advanced up the aisle, having his sheathed sword unbuckled in his left hand.

"Well met, knights and nobles," he said, coming near the table; "what cause judge you here, with our Imperial Court so near as Spires?"

"We knew not, my lord, when this meeting was appointed, that you were so soon expected," said Count Frederick of Leiningen, "or we might have referred the trial of the case to you; but this young gentleman voluntarily submitted himself to the judgment of those here assembled; and it was agreed, on both parts, that there should be no appeal--though this good Lord of Ehrenstein has thought fit to make one."

"There must ever be an appeal to the Imperial Court," said the monarch, moving round to take the seat which Count Frederick had placed for him, in the centre of the table. "No agreement can frustrate the laws of this empire. Therefore the Count's appeal is good; and we will hear it this night, having already some cognizance of the questions in debate."

Thus saying, he seated himself, laying his sheathed sword upon the table, and waving his hand to some gentlemen who had followed him more closely than the rest of his train. Six of these immediately advanced, and arranged themselves round the table, as if about to form a new court. The knights and gentlemen who had accompanied Count Frederick of Leiningen and the Count of Ehrenstein, looked at each other and their lords with a glance of hesitation, not knowing whether to withdraw or not; and while Count Frederick turned his eyes to the Emperor, the Count of Ehrenstein bent his upon the ground, by no means well satisfied, notwithstanding the favour the Emperor had shown his appeal, that his cause should be tried by a tribunal completely independent of his influence.

After a moment's wavering doubt, one or two of those who had previously occupied seats round the table, took a step back, as if to withdraw, and give up their places to the Imperial Councillors; but the Emperor stopped them, saying, "Stay, gentlemen, stay; we will have your assistance likewise, as you have already heard this cause in part; and we will abridge some forms, to come at the truth. Who is this young gentleman that stands before us, with two of the officers of our own court, and some other knights, whom we do not know?"

Before any one could answer in a more formal manner, the Count of Ehrenstein exclaimed, vehemently, "This, my lord the Emperor, is the bastard son of Charles, Count of Altenburg, brought up by cunning Brother George, the monk, and tutored by him to steal away my daughter, and to put in a false claim to my inheritance."

"How is this, young man?" said the Emperor, looking gravely at Ferdinand of Altenburg; "is this charge true? I pray you, remember that this shall be sifted to the very bottom, and the severest punishment of the law shall fall upon him who speaks falsely. Answer me,--is this true?"

"It is false, my lord," replied Ferdinand, in a calm, firm tone; "I claim here, before your court, to be received and acknowledged as Count of Ehrenstein, and to receive the lands and lordships thereof, doing homage, and rendering service for them as fiefs of the empire; and I am ready, even now, to prove my title; so that there shall be no doubt left."

"Ah! you are well-tutored, I can believe," exclaimed the Count; but Ferdinand went on, not heeding his interruption, saying, "I have already tendered proofs from the Imperial Chancery, of the marriage of my late father, the Count of Ehrenstein, and also of my own birth."

"Of the birth of a son," exclaimed the Count of Ehrenstein; "a son, who perished afterwards, as well as his mother."

"Well, then," cried the Emperor, turning to him quickly, "you admit the marriage of your brother, and the birth of a son issuing from that marriage?"

The Count of Ehrenstein was silent, gnawing his under lip, and fixing his eyes upon the table; but Count Frederick of Leiningen replied to the Emperor's question, "He cannot deny it, mighty lord; proofs that admit of no doubt are now in hands of these two noble knights; officers, as I understand, of your Imperial Court."

"This simplifies the question greatly," said the Emperor; "let me look at the papers."

The officers who had before produced them immediately presented them to their Imperial

Lord, who examined them closely, looked at the seals and the numerous signatures of authentication, and then returned them, saying, "They are in due form, and perfect in every respect. There can be no doubt. This part of the case is proved; it remains for you, young gentleman, to establish on unquestionable evidence that you are the son thus born, otherwise these facts go for nothing."

"It shall be done, my lord, clearly and step by step; but I would fain know whether your Majesty judges best, that I should commence from the period of this son's birth, and trace his life downward, till you find him here before you, or to go back from the present with my past history, till it connects itself with that of the son of whose birth you have proof."

"The latter were the better course," said the Emperor; "for, as things that have lately happened are more likely to be within man's memories than things remote, we shall more speedily and easily arrive at a flaw, if there be one."

"The last twelve years of my life, my lord," replied Ferdinand, "are known to many here present. During that period, or nearly that period, I have dwelt in the castle of Ehrenstein, first as a page, then as a squire to my uncle, calling himself Count of Ehrenstein--is this admitted, or does it require proof?"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the Count of Ehrenstein; "we all know the kindness that for twelve years you have received at my hands, and how you have repaid it. It is admitted, ay, and proved, that for that time you have been a retainer in the castle of Ehrenstein; but who placed you there?"

"Father George of Altenburg," replied the young gentleman, "by whom, during the two years preceding, I was educated at the abbey of--"

"To be sure," exclaimed the Count again, "who should educate his brother's bastard but the monk?"

"To refute this," replied Ferdinand of Altenburg, "I will call the monk himself, who can prove from whose hands he received me."

"Let the monk be called," exclaimed the Emperor; "summon Father George of Altenburg by the sound of the trumpet. We must have his evidence, or adjourn our sitting."

These words gave a fresh hope to the Count of Ehrenstein; for to have delayed the investigation, even for a short time, would have delivered him from the immediate presence of the Imperial guards, whose proximity did not at all please him, and would have enabled him to employ any of those many means of resisting right, which were often resorted to successfully in those days. But the instant after, a trumpet sounded at the door of the chapel, and the name of Father George was pronounced. After a moment's pause, the crowd that filled the lower part of the building, began to move and fall back on either hand, and the tall form and fine countenance of the monk was seen advancing up the aisle.

"This is all concerted," muttered the Count of Ehrenstein to himself; "the cause is judged before it is heard."

The Emperor, however, without noticing his half audible words, raised his voice and addressed Father George of Altenburg, even before he had reached the table, saying, "Father, we have ever heard that you are a good and holy man, and we now call upon you to speak truth, and to tell us who is that young man now standing before us, as you will answer to God."

"This," said Father George, laying his left hand upon Ferdinand's shoulder, "is Ferdinand of Ehrenstein, the son of my beloved friend, the late Count."

"Can you prove this fact?" inquired the monarch; "for this is a matter of serious import, and we must not decide hastily, even upon the showing of a holy man like you. From whom did you receive this boy, that you so well know he is Ferdinand of Ehrenstein?"

"From his own mother, my lord the Emperor," replied Father George; "that is to say, not from her own hands; for unhappily I was not present when she was seized with the fever at Nuremberg; but at the point of death, when she had received extreme unction, and had taken leave of all worldly things, she sent him to me by one who had been faithful and true to her, and who brought him safely to the abbey, and delivered him into my hands, in the time of Abbot Waldimer."

"But what proof had you that this was the son of the Countess of Ehrenstein; how did you know that it was not the son of some one else?"

"I had often seen the boy before;" replied Father George: "from his infancy up to that hour, I had never been two months without holding him on my knee. He changed, it is true, from the soft infant in the nurse's arms, to the light, wild, vigorous boy; but in that slow and gradual change something still remained which showed the same being was there before my eyes: one day bore over to the next the lineaments of my dead friend's child; and though in each two months I could see a difference in the boy, yet there were the same eyes looked upon me, the same lips smiled when I spoke to him. It was like a sapling that I watched and nourished, increasing in height,

putting forth leaves and flowers, but still the same, whether as the tall tree or the young shoot."

"You say a faithful servant brought him to you," said the Emperor, after pausing a moment, when Father George had done speaking; "is that person still living?"

"He is, my lord, and is here," answered the monk.

"Call him," rejoined the Emperor; and Father George raising his voice, pronounced the name of Franz Creussen, when immediately from one of the side aisles, pushed forward between the columns the gigantic form of the blacksmith: no longer, indeed, in the garb of his trade, but armed from the neck to the heel in black armour. His head alone was bare, with the short, curly hair sweeping round his bold face.

"Ah! our good friend the blacksmith, who shod my horse the other day in the woods," exclaimed the Emperor; "but how is it, friend? You seem to have changed your trade."

"But taken up my old one, Kaiser," answered the deep thundering voice of Franz Creussen. "I was bred to arms, and hammered on enemies' heads before I touched an anvil."

"Then how came you to change one profession for the other?" asked the Emperor.

"Oh, every man has many reasons for one thing," said Franz Creussen; "mine were partly a fondness for iron, partly to gain my bread at a time when no wars were going on, partly to watch and protect this boy, my dead lord's child."

"Then you, too, know him to be the son of the late Count of Ehrenstein?" said the Emperor.

"He was the late Count's lady's son," answered Franz Creussen, bluffly; "and the Count never doubted he was his own."

"And did you bring him to Father George," inquired the Emperor, "at his mother's death?"

"The case is this, my lord," replied the blacksmith: "I never quitted the dear good lady for any length of time, from the hour when we set out from Venice, till the hour when she told me to carry the lad to Father George of Altenburg, and made me swear that I would watch and guard him at the peril of my life. I was not always with her, I was not always in the house; for when we arrived at Augsburg, we had notice that yon lord, the Count's brother, had seized upon the lands, had strangled poor Rudolph of Oggersheim, who bore him the tidings of his brother's fate, and had set men to waylay us and destroy us, so that he might enjoy the inheritance in peace. It was needful, therefore, to keep quiet, and to watch shrewdly, too; and I, with the rest of the men, kept guard about the place, riding here, and riding there, for news, till we were all obliged to fly together, having tidings from Father George here, that the Baron of Eppenfeld had set out with all his band, to carry off the lady and her child, and drown them in the Danube, by orders of yon lord."

"It is false!" cried the Count of Ehrenstein; "it is a bitter falsehood!"

"False!" thundered Franz Creussen; "if I had you on this side of the table, I would cleave you to the jaws;" and he ran his hand angrily over his heated brow; but, the next minute he added with a laugh: "I will do better, I will convict you. I have a witness here you wot not of.--Ho! my men, bring in the prisoner, bring in the Baron of Eppenfeld.--The truth shall appear at length, Count William. Ha! you tremble and turn pale, to find that he whom you let out of Ehrenstein has fallen into the hands of Franz Creussen."

The Count of Ehrenstein remained silent; and well he might, for there, in the presence of the Emperor, guarded by two stout soldiers, stood the Baron of Eppenfeld, with the same look of careless, almost gay, indifference which we have seen him bear on so many and so varied occasions, without a touch of fear, of embarrassment or remorse.

"Ah! plunderer and knave, have you been caught at length?" exclaimed the Emperor, with his eyes flashing, as he gazed upon the Baron. "By the Lord that lives! I will put down such as you within this empire, so that the memory of your cruel deeds and of your terrible punishment shall become a tale to frighten children with."

"Faith! my good Lord," replied the Baron; "if you do that, you will have to sweep your house clean; for I am not one whit worse than at least a half of your good nobles, only I have done what I thought fit to do somewhat more openly. To take men's purses sword in hand, to my mind, is not half so bad as to rot their reputation with a smooth tongue; to make men's merchandise pay toll on the highways of the world is a better deed than to ruin them by false accusations; to fight against strong men with harness on their backs, better than to skin poor boors alive who have no means of defending themselves."

"There is some truth in what you say," replied the Emperor; "yet you shall find that other men's crimes shall not excuse your own. Now, what know you of this Lord of Ehrenstein, here?"

"Oh, I know a good deal," answered the Baron, with a careless laugh; "but look you, Lord Emperor, you have used sharp words to my ear, and if I take your meaning rightly, you intend to

use a sharp axe on my neck. Now, I say, out upon those fools who babble when they die! The wolf, the wolf is the brave beast who will not give one howl when the dogs worry him. If there be any profit in speaking, I will speak; but if I am to go on the long march, I will troop off in silence. If there be any choice which is to go, the Lord of Ehrenstein or I, why, I would decline the honour, and beg him to lead the way; but if I am to go at all events, I do not need his company. I can travel alone quite well to the low bed in the dark house."

"Your very words are a confession, robber," replied the Emperor; "and you shall die whether you speak or not. I will not barter justice due on one man's head, even for evidence against another, perhaps not less guilty."

"I can supply the testimony he refuses to give, mighty lord," said Count Frederick of Leiningen, in a grave tone. "It is with deep regret that I place in your Majesty's hands these papers, taken by me when we stormed the castle of Eppenfeld. I have looked over them, and have held them until now, in the hope that one who was a companion of my boyhood would show some signs of repentance for deeds so black as those disclosed this night; but now I am bound to give them up, that justice may be done. You will there see the price given, or offered, for the death of Ferdinand of Ehrenstein and his mother, and will find full proof of the truth of all that good Franz Creussen has advanced."

The Count of Ehrenstein folded his arms upon his chest, and raised his head haughtily. "All are against me here," he said, in a stern and bitter tone. "My lord the Emperor, I did not come here prepared for these charges. False and groundless I pronounce them to be; and false and groundless I will prove them; but I still require time to call my own evidence, and to send for some who are now at a distance, but who can show that this accusation has been devised to ruin me; that those papers are fabricated; and that this Baron of Eppenfeld has long threatened me with disclosing the pretended treachery on my part against my brother's widow, sometimes affirming, sometimes denying--ay, even in writing--that his charge was true. Here is one present,--this very reverend priest, the chaplain of Count Ferdinand,--who has seen his denial of all these charges; nay, more, who even saw him sign it, and read it over to him."

"Ha! ha! ha! my friend, the knave!" cried the Baron of Eppenfeld. "Say you so?--say you so? What, these are all lies of my invention, are they? 'Tis good--'tis mighty good. But now, remember, I spare you no more. I was quite ready to do you a good turn, and die--if needs must be--without speaking; but now you turn so ungratefully upon me, all the truth shall out."

"You see, my mighty lord," said the Count, turning to the Emperor, "that he is moved by every breath of passion, and not by the simple voice of truth. Let the priest speak. Did he, or did he not, my reverend friend, sign a paper, denying all these charges to be true, after having heard every word written therein read clearly over to him?"

"Even so," answered the priest, in a deliberate tone; "he heard the paper read, and made some marks meant for his name, though the orthography was aught but good; and at the same time he told me, by way of protest, that he signed to save his life, which you had threatened to take, by secret means, in prison to gain a chance of liberty, which you had promised, and to obtain a certain sum of money, which was to be added, to send him on his way."

There was a deep silence for a minute, while all eyes were fixed upon the Count of Ehrenstein, whose eyes seemed to grow dim and glassy, and whose cheek was deadly pale. It was he himself who spoke first, however, saying, in a faltering tone, "I claim time, my lord; I claim time to meet an accusation long prepared and carefully devised, and to bring forward proofs that this youth is not what he pretends to be."

"Time you shall have, Sir," replied the Emperor, sternly, "to meet the dark charges brought against you. It is but right you should; and we will see justice done you on that score; though, if it be proved that this young gentleman is Count of Ehrenstein, to his court, as your sovereign lord, for all lands you hold, are you amenable for all crimes done against him. You shall have time, as I have said; but it shall be in sure custody. Ho! Count Rudolph, advance, and receive the body of William, calling himself Count of Ehrenstein, to produce before our Imperial Court, at Spire, when need shall be, on peril of all that you can forfeit to the empire."

Count Rudolph of Schönborn, came forward with two men-at-arms, and laid his hand upon the Count of Ehrenstein's shoulder, saying, "Your sword, my good lord."

The Count gave it up, without vain resistance; and the Emperor leaned his head upon his hand, with his eyes fixed upon the papers, as if lost in thought of their contents. At length, after a silent pause of more than a minute, Ferdinand--whom we have called of Altenburg--advanced a step, and said, in a low and deferential voice, "I pray you, mighty Sir, to judge at once the cause between me and my uncle here present, concerning the lands of Ehrenstein. He came hither, pledging himself to abide, in all things betwixt him and me, by the decision of the noble gentlemen whom you found here assembled. Upon an after-thought, he appealed to your Imperial Majesty; and though he was barred by previous renunciation, I am as ready to submit to your high judgment as he can be; but I would fain have it speedy, as my men even now hold the castle of Ehrenstein, which he left nearly ungarrisoned, in order to seize me here, if the cause should go against him. Now I am not disposed to hold, even for an hour, that which is not mine; and if my claim be not made good this night, I am ready to withdraw my people from his house."

"You speak well, young gentleman," said the Emperor; "and it is but fit that, ere the deep and terrible accusation which has been urged before us be tried upon its merits, we should know whether you be his vassal or he yours. As far as we have hitherto gone, the weight of proof seems in your favour; and, casting aside all consideration of the crimes with which he is charged, we will freely examine your title as you can further prove it. Remove that Baron of Eppenfled, till we can deal with him further."

"Stay, stay," cried the Baron, shaking off the hands of two stout soldiers, who were about to take him somewhat unceremoniously from the Emperor's presence; "I can tell you something that will soon settle all your doubts, if you will promise me good meat and drink.--I mean warm wine of Ingelheim, or better still, of Eberbach, till I die."

"That you shall have," said the Emperor, with a smile crossing his face against his will, "if you do clear up all doubts. What is it you have to say?"

"This," replied the Baron: "When I was setting out for Augsburg, to do the bidding of my noble friend the Count here, he informed me, in order to make right sure that I fell into no mistake regarding his nephew, that the poor man he put to death had told him there was a cross marked in deep blue upon the boy's left side, above the heart--stamped there by magic, for aught I know, but so that no water would bring it out--in memory of his father's journey to the Holy Land. They are the Count's own words. I am not sure that you may not find them there in the letter; for I read little, and write less; so that--as time flies, and memories fly with it--I know not whether the hint was written or spoken; but be you sure that if the mark be on his breast, he is the heir. If not, he may be any man else's son, but not the late good Count of Ehrenstein's--a worthy man he was as ever drew a sword."

"Ha!" said the Emperor, fixing his eyes upon him; "I thought he had been your enemy, and curbed, with a strong hand, your lawless doings."

"Ay, my lord Emperor," answered the Baron; "but yet, though the lion rends us and we fly him, we love him better than the wolf, and own him for a gallant beast. The last Count was fierce enough with us who live after the old fashion. He slew William of Feldhofen, and burnt the castle of John of Bernau; but yet he did it all manly, with notice given and banner on the wind; man to man, and lance to lance. He was a true friend or a true enemy, and not like that man, who will use and betray. But look to the boy's breast. I will swear that the words were spoken--"

"They are written here," rejoined the Emperor; "but he calls the child in this letter his brother's bastard, and speaks of the mother as a concubine."

"That is disproved by these papers, and two competent witnesses, mighty lord," said the knight who had taken so active a part in examining the Count's charges against Ferdinand: "the only question remaining for decision is, whether this youth, who was placed by the good monk Father George under the care of that noble lord, is the boy who came with the Countess of Ehrenstein from Venice."

"The monk declares it, and this good man, Franz Creussen, also," answered the Emperor; "but the latter is not of noble blood."

Franz Creussen laughed aloud. "Ah, ha!" he said, "as if an honest man were not an honest man, because he does not wear beasts and birds embroidered on his shirt. You have there a proof how a proud noble can lie and cheat;" and he pointed to the Count of Ehrenstein, adding, "but look at the boy's breast. His uncle writes to have the boy who was brought to Augsburg killed, and says he is marked with a cross. We say this is the boy; and if the cross be there, 'tis proof, taken with our oaths. Then you have the testimony of two knights, and sundry papers, that the boy so brought was born in lawful wedlock. What want you more? But if you want it, you shall have it."

"What he says is true," replied the monarch; "the mark here described, if found upon him, will be strong corroborative evidence."

"It is here, my lord," said Ferdinand, opening the bosom of his doublet; "I have borne it from a child;" and there, upon his left breast, appeared in faint blue lines, but perfectly distinct, the figure of a cross.

"Lucky you bathed not in the good Count's presence," said a voice behind Count Frederick of Leiningen; "or he would have had out the heart that pants beneath the cross."

"Well, noble lords," exclaimed the Emperor, not noticing this interruption, "you have heard the evidence in this strange case; and to you I will leave the judgment, reserving to myself to see it carried out, with all regard to speedy justice."

There was a short pause, and then the knight, who was fond of all the niceties of feudal law, observed, "This good man, Franz Creussen, has said there can be more evidence brought. It were well that we heard all that can be testified, so that no doubt may remain on the mind of any one."

"Stay," said the Emperor: "ere you go farther, in order to give this lord the chance of atoning for the wrong he has done, and meriting grace from him whom he has wronged, let him be asked

the question, Does he yield to testimony which to us seems most conclusive?--does he acknowledge that this is his brother's lawful son? Will he at once give up lands and lordships he unjustly holds, or will he resist, and have the whole knavery unravelled to the last thread?"

Few there present had looked at the face of the Count of Ehrenstein for some minutes, as he stood somewhat behind, with Count Rudolph's men-at-arms on either side; but had they turned their eyes that way they would have beheld the working of strong passions on a countenance long trained to withstand emotions, and still resisting in a degree their influence.

At first, and especially when the evidence of the Baron of Eppenfeld was given regarding the cross, he had more than once seemed about to interrupt the proceedings with some vehement burst of passion; but gradually his countenance fell, his firmness seemed to forsake him. His cheek, indeed, could not well grow paler than it had been for some time; but his lip quivered, his eye sought the ground, his hands grasping his sword-belt moved convulsively, and even his cheeks looked wan and hollow. The last words of the Emperor he seemed hardly to hear; but when Count Rudolph repeated them to him, he started and replied, after a gasp for breath, "I appeal to a freer court--to a court--"

"A freer court!" exclaimed the Emperor in an angry tone, while Count Frederick of Leiningen whispered something to him; but ere the sentence was finished a loud voice seemed to the Count of Ehrenstein to cry, "A freer court you shall have. I summon you to the court of the dead! William of Ehrenstein, appear before the seat of your true judge!"

At the same moment it appeared to the eyes of the culprit, that the light of the two torches suddenly went out; the chapel was left almost in darkness, illuminated only by the small lamp that stood upon the table. The Emperor and all the knights rose and drew back, as if in fear; and by the faint rays that streamed down the aisle he beheld a change on the figures that crowded round. Armed men and officers, and forms robed in silks and furs disappeared; and sweeping up in a shadowy circle, there came a line of tall dark figures, each covered with a long grey garment not unlike a shroud. Each held in the gauntleted hand, not by the hilt, but by the cold blade, a naked sword; and behind the semicircle, which stretched from one side of the chapel to the other, rose a number of old dusty banners and pennons, tattered and soiled, and stained apparently with blood. A chair--moved forward by hands that were not seen--was placed in the midst, and one of the tall grey figures, with the hood of his robe falling far over the face, and the folds enveloping the chin and mouth, seated itself therein, and waved the hand as if for silence. Instantly a trumpet was heard echoing round and round the old walls, and a solemn voice proclaimed, "William of Ehrenstein, appear before your liege lord and brother, dead in the year of grace 14--, and answer to the charge of treason and felony, for that you did incite his vassals to do him to death; for that you did slay in prison his faithful henchman, Rudolph of Oggersheim; for that you did attempt to murder his widow and his son, your lord. Stand forth, and answer to these charges, as God shall give you courage!" and again came a loud blast of the trumpet.

The Count of Ehrenstein felt himself free, for those who had stood beside him had drawn back. He gazed wildly round him--took a step forward--stretched forth his hands as if struck with sudden blindness, and then fell prone to the ground without sense or motion.

CHAPTER XLIII.

When the Count of Ehrenstein opened his eyes, it seemed to him as if he were in a dream, or as if he had been dreaming. The shrouded figures, the darkened chapel, all had passed away, and everything was restored to the same state as it had been before the awful apparition had presented itself to his sight. There sat the Emperor in the centre of the table, the knights forming the court were placed around. Ferdinand, Father George, Franz Creussen, and those who had followed them, stood in the centre aisle; the torches glided upon the walls and pillars, and the end of the nave was crowded with the gaily dressed nobles and officers of the Imperial Court. He himself, supported by two guards, was seated on a settle, a few yards to the left of the Emperor; and Count Rudolph of Schönborn, with his arm crossed upon his chest, was gazing at him attentively, as if watching the progress of his recovery.

The next moment, the Emperor's voice was heard, saying, in a loud stern tone, "We can wait no longer; we must proceed to judgment."

"Stay, my lord, stay," replied Count Rudolph; "he revives, he is opening his eyes."

"Where am I?" murmured the Count, in a low tone. "What has become of them? Where have they gone to?"

"Whom do you mean?" asked Count Rudolph, gravely.

"My brother and his followers," said the Count, closing his eyes again, as if afraid of beholding some dreadful sight. "I saw them there--there before me."

"Your brain has wandered, my good lord," said Count Rudolph; "all are here present who have been here to-night."

"It is a warning from Heaven," observed the voice of Father George, "calling upon a bad man, perhaps for the last time, to repent of what he has wrongly done, and to make restitution of what he unjustly holds. Let him obey the voice of conscience, before it be too late."

"Your last words, my lord," said Count Rudolph, "uttered just before you fell, were insulting to the Emperor and his court. You appealed to another tribunal; but, from what you have just said, it would seem that you were not then in command of your understanding. Doubtless, the Emperor will take this into consideration, and hear anything that you may have to say before he pronounces judgment between you and your nephew, as he is about to do."

The Count rose feebly, with a pale cheek and haggard eye; and Count Frederick of Leiningen, who was gazing at him, exclaimed, in an eager and a friendly tone, "I beseech you, William of Ehrenstein, do justice, and remember equity. To every one here present, I believe, this case seems perfectly clear. Your brother's son stands before you--there cannot be a doubt of it. It is proved that he was born in lawful marriage; yield to him that which is rightly his; and, by a grateful acquiescence in that which you cannot prevent, atone for the past, and induce him not to inquire farther into deeds that it were best to leave obscure."

"A little comfortable darkness is not unpleasant to most men," said the jester, from behind his lord; but the Count of Ehrenstein waved his hand fiercely, exclaiming, "I will never yield that which is mine to this base tissue of forged evidence. My lands may be torn from me by the arm of power; but I will not consent to the tyranny that wrongs me."

"Have you aught more to say?" demanded the Emperor, gazing at him sternly. The Count was silent, rolling his eyes around, as if seeking for something to reply, and finding naught; and the monarch, after a moment's pause, proceeded.

"To your judgment, noble lords, I leave this cause," he said. "You will consider, first, whether you have evidence sufficient; next, if you have, you will judge whether the claim of this young gentleman be, or be not, fully substantiated. I will have no voice therein, but leave you free to decide upon these questions, that no man hereafter may say you have been influenced by aught but your own sense of right and justice." Thus saying, he rose from his seat, and took two steps back, standing with his arms folded upon his chest, and his eyes bent upon the ground. A low and murmured consultation instantly took place amongst the gentlemen round the table; and, after a very short hesitation, the eldest rose, and, turning to the Emperor, said, "We have decided, my lord, that the evidence is fully sufficient."

"Then judge upon it," replied the Emperor, briefly. "I am here to see your judgment executed."

Again a low murmured consultation took place, and, once more, the old knight rose and said, "We find, upon the evidence tendered to us by Ferdinand, hitherto called of Altenburg, that he is the lawful son of the late Count Ferdinand Charles of Ehrenstein, and as such entitled to the lands, lordships, rights, and privileges of the house of Ehrenstein, upon doing due and customary homage, and rendering such service to the Imperial Crown as his predecessors have done before him."

There was a dead silence for a moment. The Count clenched his hands tight together, and gnashed his teeth; and then Count Frederick of Leiningen, and Father George of Altenburg, took Ferdinand by the hand, and led him between them to the Emperor. He was about to kneel, and tender homage at once; but the monarch took him in his arms, and embraced him, saying, "I give you joy, young Sir, upon the recovery of your own. Reserve your homage, however, for another day, when it shall be received in public, in our city of Spires. At present, there is another task before you, and one more form to be gone through, before I place you in that chair, to take the first steps in judging those who have wronged you." He then raised his voice, and said, aloud, "Let the trumpet sound, and the herald call upon any one who denies that Ferdinand, hitherto named 'of Altenburg,' is of right, Count of Ehrenstein, to come forward now, and show cause why he should not be pronounced such by the Imperial Court, and received to homage accordingly. Sound!"

Instantly the trumpet sounded at the door of the chapel, and a herald made proclamation in due form. All men listened to the words in silence, not, indeed, expecting any reply, except it were from Count William.

To the surprise of all, however, a voice, not very far from where the Emperor stood, exclaimed aloud, "I do deny his title!"

There was a slight movement among the crowd; the lords and knights made way for the appellant; all eyes from the other parts of the chapel turned in the direction of the altar, and wonder, not unmixed with scorn, was depicted on every countenance but two or three, when the

jester advanced from the group around the Emperor, and took his way straight towards the chair in which the monarch had lately sat.

"What foolery is this?" cried one.

"Cast the mad fellow out!" said another.

"This is no time for such jests," said a third.

But, with a firm and lordly step, a head held high, and an air of dignity and command in his whole look, the jester walked up to the table, seated himself in the central chair, and then looking round to the knights who had pronounced judgment, he said, in a loud, clear voice, "You have pronounced that Ferdinand of Ehrenstein is the lawful son of Ferdinand Charles, upon good, just, and true evidence. But before you pronounce him Count of Ehrenstein you must prove that Ferdinand Charles is dead."

Thus saying, he removed the unsightly cap from his head, and with it a large quantity of white hair, threw the bauble from his hand into the midst of the aisle, cast back the cloak from his shoulders, and gazed around him,--as lordly a man, in his presence and bearing, as any in the whole court.

As he did so, a cry, strange and horrible, came from the group on the left; and Count William of Ehrenstein darted forward, with his hands clasped tight together--gazed for an instant, with wild eagerness, in the face of him who had so boldly seated himself in the Emperor's chair--and then falling on his knees, exclaimed, "Ferdinand! Ferdinand!"

The multitude in the chapel seemed at once to conceive the whole; and a loud shout--the mixture of surprise and satisfaction--burst from them, and made the vaulted roof ring. At the same moment, too, good Franz Creussen strode up to the table, and taking the Count's hand in his, wrung it hard, exclaiming, "Welcome to your own again, my good and noble lord!"

But how shall I depict all the varied expressions on the countenances of those who surrounded the table at that moment:--the joy, the surprise, the bewilderment in the face of Ferdinand of Ehrenstein;--the agony and despair in that of his uncle, as he still knelt, with the eye of his brother fixed even fiercely upon him; the look of terror and dismay of old Karl von Mosbach; and the calm and triumphant glance of satisfaction in the eyes of the two old knights who had accompanied Ferdinand thither, and of several other hardy warriors around.

Nor was there less pleasure in the aspect of Count Frederick of Leiningen, who, after having paused for a moment to let the first feelings have way, advanced, and laid his hand upon the shoulder of him who had so lately appeared as his jester, and said aloud, "This is Ferdinand Charles, Count of Ehrenstein, delivered by my assistance from the bonds of the infidel. No man, who knows him and looks upon him, will deny it; but, should there be any one bold enough so to do, I will prove the fact, either by my body against his in battle, or by the course of true evidence; showing that this noble Count has, ever since his captivity, been in constant communication with the Grand Master of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem; who, at his intercession and upon his bond, has ransomed, from time to time, every one of his companions made captive at the same time with himself; and would have ransomed him also, long ago, had not the sum demanded been utterly unreasonable. William of Ehrenstein, do you deny that this is your brother?"

"I do not," answered the unhappy man, bending his head down to the table, and covering his eyes with his hands. "It is--it is my brother. Fool that I was not to know him sooner!"

"Fool that you were, indeed," replied his brother; "for fool must be every man who takes not warnings repeatedly given. You have had every means; you have had every chance. When I could have struck you in the halls that you had taken from my son,--when I could have punished you at the board, where you had no right to sit but as a guest,--when I could have made you bow the head amongst the soldiery, where you had no place but as a vassal--I forebore; although I knew you to be perfidious, blood-stained, cruel! But yet I hoped that there might be some grace left,--that some redeeming quality--some tardy repentance of error--might give room for clemency,--might excuse, to my own heart, the traitor against my own life, the plotter against my child, the persecutor of my wife, the assassin of a faithful though humble friend. Yet here, even here, to the very last, no touch of remorse has shaken you,--no shame has found place in your bosom. When proofs, as clear as day, have established rights of another and your own guilt, you have resisted, with base and dishonourable subterfuges, the restitution of that to which you had no claim; and have striven to murder, with words, him whom your steel was impotent to reach. The day of mercy and tenderness is past; I have swept from my bosom every feeling of brotherly love--every memory of youthful hours--all the linked tenderness of young affections,--all the sweet bonds of the early heart. I deal with you as traitor, knave, assassin;--false to your brother and your lord; and henceforth, from me, hope neither grace, nor favour, nor compassion. Not as you have done to others will I do to you; but, with the stern and rigid arm of impartial justice, I will strike at proved crimes and wickedness unrepented.--My lord the Emperor," he continued, rising, "I have usurped this seat too long, and crave your gracious pardon; but at your hands I demand this man, my vassal and my liegeman, whom I formerly called brother, to deal with him, in my court, according as justice shall determine; and justice he shall have, even to the uttermost jot, according to the laws and customs of the nobles of this realm."

While he spoke, the culprit had remained with his head bent down, and his face hidden; but the moment that the stern words left the Count's lips, his brother made a convulsive motion forward, and grasped his knees, exclaiming, "Ferdinand! Ferdinand!--Have mercy, have pity!"

But the Count spurned him from him, asking, in a deep fierce tone, "Have you had pity?" And as the unfortunate man fell back upon the pavement, there was a shrill cry--not exactly a shriek, but the sound of grief rather than of terror; and suddenly from between the pillars which separated the south aisle from the nave, a beautiful form darted forward, passed the knights before the table, passed the prostrate suppliant and his brother, passed Father George and the Emperor, and, advancing straight to Ferdinand of Ehrenstein, caught his hand, and, casting herself upon her knees at his feet, raised that beautiful face toward him, exclaiming, "Ferdinand! Ferdinand! my husband, my beloved! Now, remember the promise that you made me, the oath you swore. Save my father: intercede for him--now, even now, when the warm gush of parental love must be flowing from the heart of him who has our fate in his hands, when the long yearnings of the soul to see his child must make his spirit tender. Save my father--save him, my husband; by your oath, by our hopes, by our mutual love. Kneel to him--I will kneel too."

Ferdinand replied not but by a mute caress; but then advancing, he bent his knee before the Count, saying, "My father!" Adelaide followed timidly, and knelt beside him. But the Count seemed not to notice her; and, casting his arms round the youth's neck, he bent his head over him, while tears bedewed his cheeks, murmuring with faltering accents, "My son! My brave, my noble son!"

At the same time he strove to raise him; but Ferdinand remained upon his knee, and lifting his eyes to the Count's face, he answered, "Oh, my father, my dear father! Welcome, welcome from bonds, from captivity, from the grave, to receive your own, and to make all your own happy. A boon, a boon, my father--in this hour of unexpected, of unparalleled joy, grant your child one boon. Cloud not this hour of happiness by the darkest blot that can stain existence. Spare your brother. He may have wronged you, he may have wronged me, but he is still your brother. Let it not be said that there was one man in all your lordships who had real cause to mourn, that the Count of Ehrenstein came to claim his own again. Let it be all bright, let it be an hour of sunshine and of joy to every one, that brought you back to us, when we all thought you lost for ever."

Adelaide also clasped her hands, and, gazing in his face, strove eagerly to speak, but terror had too strong possession of her, and all that she could utter was, "He is my father--have mercy, have mercy!"

"He is your father, Lady," answered the Count, sternly; "he is my brother. His wrongs to me I could forgive--I do forgive them. His wrongs to those who were dearer to me than life, I forgive them too. But he has wronged others, ay, and with a darker and more devilish art than man might fancy hell itself could produce--blackened the name of the honest and the true, of the most faithful of servants and friends, that he might stifle in the blood of the messenger the crimes committed against him who sent him. Entreat not, Ferdinand, for it is in vain. In this I am immovable. The hour of mercy, as I have said, is past. Endurance has been prolonged to the utmost; and not even the voice of a son, dear and beloved though he may be, can shake me in my purpose. It is all, all in vain. Rise, youth: if I must speak plain, I deny your boon--I refuse your prayer; and this man dies, as I hope--"

"Hold!" said Father George, "there is still another voice to be heard."

"Not yours, good Father," said the Count. "I love, I esteem you. I know that for this object you have laboured to unite him who is dearest to me on this earth, to the daughter of him who has become my bitterest foe; and I have seen and suffered it, for her virtues atone for the crime of being his daughter. But I have suffered it with the full resolve of guarding myself sternly against your pious policy, and not permitting my firm heart to be moved, even by filial love or parental tenderness, to pardon him who has hardened his heart till pity were folly, and mercy were injustice. Speak not for him; for I will not hear. Your voice is powerless as theirs."

"There may be another stronger," said the monk; and at the same moment a lady, closely veiled, advanced from behind him.

"I know not that!" she said (and she, too, knelt at the Count's feet), "my voice was once strong with you, my noble lord. I am sure that it will be powerful still, unless you are changed indeed--changed in heart, as I am in form, unless your spirit has lost that beauty of essence which I have lost of person. Yet my voice, now as ever, shall be raised only in entreaty, beseeching you to remember hours of tenderness and love long past, and to grant life and pardon to this man, your brother, for the sake of one who has mourned and wept full twenty years for you."

A strange change had come over the Count of Ehrenstein. It could hardly be said he listened. He heard it, it is true; but his spirit seemed pre-occupied by other thoughts. His face turned deadly pale; he trembled in every limb; he gasped, as if for breath; and all he could utter was, "That voice--that voice!" As she ended, he stretched forth his hands eagerly towards the veil, but ere he could touch it, she threw it back herself, and after one momentary gaze, he cast his arms around her, exclaiming, "My wife, my beloved!" and pressed her to his bosom, with a convulsive clasp.

There was a deep silence through the chapel for some moments, and then, as she still remained resting on her husband's bosom, the voice of the Countess of Ehrenstein murmured a few words in his ear.

"Take him," cried the Count, suddenly, casting wide his right arm, and pointing to his brother, while his left still pressed his wife to his heart: "do with him what you will,--I give him to you, and renounce all power over him and his fate."

Adelaide caught the lady's hand, and kissed it; and gently releasing herself from her husband's embrace, the Countess of Ehrenstein approached his brother, and said, in a low tone, "You are free, my lord; you had better, perhaps, retire, and for a time betake you to some place of seclusion till my lord and husband has forgotten some of the past events, or has time to think more gently of them."

The unhappy man bowed his head low, and with pale cheek, turned away. The crowd drew back to let him pass; but ere he could take two steps from the spot where this scene had passed, Adelaide sprang forward and knelt before him. He had not noticed--he had not seemed to see her before; but now she raised her beautiful face towards him, with the rich brown hair falling back, and the torch-light streaming on her brow; and, in a tone of musical melancholy, she said, "Forgive me, my father! Oh! forgive me, and let me go with you to comfort you. What I have done, was done only in the hope of saving you, not from undutiful disobedience. I learned that these events were coming, only under the most solemn vow of secrecy, and even then but vaguely. I was told enough, however, to know, or at least to believe, that the only means of rescuing my father from destruction, was by giving my hand to one whose voice might be most powerful with my uncle. I trust I hope that the love, which I own I felt, had no weight in my resolve; but, at all events, you are saved, my father; and my first duty now is, to beseech your forgiveness, and to try to soothe and to console you."

For an instant, as she spoke, her father eyed her with a stern and angry glance. Old passions revived; he forgot how he had fallen: pride, and the lingerings of a vengeful spirit, made themselves felt again; but as he raised his eyes, all that he saw around brought back the bitter and humiliating present. He felt that he was crushed down to the very earth,--nay, more, he felt that his own crimes crushed him. His heart was humbled--the first step to true repentance--and that better feeling threw open the gates of the breast to others: parental love returned; ay, and even a sense of gratitude for that which his child had done. He saw, he understood the motives on which she had acted; and listening, softened, to the last words she spoke, he put his arms around her, and leaning down his head, for the first time, he wept.

"I will go with you,--I will go with you," murmured Adelaide.

"Nay, my child, it must not be," replied her father. "I do believe you have acted for the best; but now you are bound in duty to another. Stay with your husband. I have done him wrong; but he loves you deeply, I am sure; and you shall teach him, by your gentle tenderness, to forget your father's faults.--Adieu, my child! May God bless and protect you!"

As he spoke, the Count of Ehrenstein strode forward, and took him by both the hands. "William," he said, "William, do you repent of what you have done?"

"From my heart and soul, Ferdinand," replied his brother. "Nay, more, I have ever repented bitterly. I have found that one crime, besides its own remorse, brings a thousand others to be repented of. The things I have done have haunted me by day and night: they have embittered life; and I have learned, too late, that though crime may purchase a moment's joy, it is sure to be followed by an existence of misery. But you know not--oh! you know not, you who have lived in one course of integrity and honour, how entanglements and temptations crowd upon one, how they interweave a net, from which the heart, were it as strong as a lion, could not break forth, when once we have plunged into a course of wrong,--how the evil wish begets the evil act,--how the evil act calls to the lie to conceal it,--how the lie, in its shame, has recourse to a new crime to cover it. None can know, none can tell, what are the difficulties, the agonies--what are the struggles, the writhings, of those who go on in doing what is wrong, with some sense of right remaining. Oh! the longing for deliverance; the eager thirst to obliterate the past; the tender thoughts of youth and infancy, and innocence and peace; the fearful looking forward to the future day, when Satan will claim his tribute of fresh wickedness to purchase a brief immunity from the penalty of the soul's dark bond; the effort for firmness, even in the course we have taken; the feeling that there is no real strength but in virtue, no fortitude but in honesty! It is inexpressible, it cannot be described or told: but I call God to witness that I speak the truth, when I say, that I even I, for the last twenty years--though I seemed to have gained all that ambition could desire--though wealth, power, luxury, enjoyment, were all at my command--have suffered tortures that hell itself can hardly equal, and which might well expiate a life of sin. I know now, I know bitterly, what is the meaning of 'the worm that never dies, and the fire that can never be quenched.' And what has this strife made me?--how changed a thing from what I was before! If I look back but for a few short years, I can see myself a different being. Do you remember, Ferdinand, when we were boys together at Würzburg, and this good lord here of Leiningen was our gay companion, how cheerfully the days passed, how light the hours seemed? Time had no weight: existence was a blessing. The free, sunshiny air came with its wings loaded with enjoyment; the breath of the spring flowers was like the balm of Eden, the singing of the birds an angels' choir. I enjoyed all, in those days; I loved you all well. My heart was open as the Heaven to every human creature.

The whole universe had nothing but delight, except when sometimes I thought, with a regretful sullenness, that you were destined to the busy scenes in which I longed to mingle, and I to a cloister's gloom, and the separation of a hard vow from all my fellow men. But that was nothing: a light cloud upon a summer's sky, in a moment borne away, and all was sunshine again, and cheerfulness.--Do you remember, Ferdinand? It seems to me but yesterday."

His face lighted up, as if the sunshine of early days shone forth on his countenance; and as he spoke, he laid his hand forgetfully upon his brother's arm, and gazed upon him with a look of tender memory. The Count, too, gave way to the soft influences of those early days: they came back upon him, as his brother spoke. One harsh feeling after another faded away, like darkness giving place to light: he leaned his arm upon Count William's shoulder; and, bending down his head, while a tear trickled from his eye, he said, "I do remember, William; I do remember all right well."

"And what am I now?" asked his brother, suddenly withdrawing from him, as if he felt that he was not worthy of that kind familiar touch; "a wretch, an outcast, hated by all, abhorrent to myself. But that is nothing--all nothing to the past. I am happier now than heretofore; for the effect of that dark struggle in my heart was strange and terrible; from kind, I had become fierce and cruel; from gentle and patient, angry and proud. Powerless to enjoy, I hated the sight of enjoyment; and with a chain of adamant about my heart, the sight of a free spirit in another was bitterness to me. Only, indeed, in the case of this youth and this dear girl did I ever witness the pure and simple pleasures of happy innocence, without hating what I witnessed for the reproof it bore me. But it was not so with them.--He knows it was not.--In his wild energies and soaring fancy, in his free spirit and his bold heart, he would often call back the brother of my youth, vaguely but sweetly, and in the regrets I felt there might mingle melancholy, but no pain. It was too indistinct to wound. It was as a sight or a sound that we have known in childhood, coming back upon the ear of age, and cheating it with a misty dream of early joy."

"Oh, it was sweet to mark him; and, though sometimes--provoked to sudden frenzy, as if a demon whispered, he had wrongs to avenge upon me--I would be fierce and wayward with him, like a tyrant as I was, yet Heaven can testify that I loved him better than any being on earth, except this my child."

The Count suddenly took him by the hand, and, pointing to Father George, he said, "There is hope yet, William--good hope, I am sure; the seed may lie long in the foul earth, but will germinate and bud, and grow and blossom, and bear fruit at last. Speak with this holy man: he will comfort you, he will lead you to a better forgiveness than a brother's, which is already given. A time in solitude, in thought, and prayer, will calm down remorse into repentance, and hope and peace may yet visit your latter days. I have been entangled for twenty years in earthly bonds: you in fetters that have chained the spirit. I have returned, against all likelihood, to claim that which was once mine; you will return, too, to take a former and a better nature upon you. If she so wills it, this dear girl shall go with you to comfort you."

"No," exclaimed his brother,--"no. That selfishness shall be the first I will cast off. She shall remain where present duty calls her, with those who love and will cherish her. God's blessing upon you, my child! may you be happy as you deserve! and, that no thought for me may break in upon your peace, be assured that the only state in which I can now find repose, is that of solitude and thought, where, removed afar from the battlefield of the passions, I can rest after the combat in which I have been vanquished; not without pain from my wounds, and shame for my defeat, but still with the hope of recovery, and trust in the future.--Adieu! adieu!" and, disengaging his hand from Adelaide, as she bent her head over it bedewing it with tears, he turned towards the door of the chapel, and walked silently away.

Father George followed him, without a word, merely waving his hand, in token of farewell to the party that remained; and a number of those present crowded round the Count of Ehrenstein, eagerly grasping his hand, and congratulating him upon the events of that night. Adelaide, with her head bent and her eyes full of tears, stood, like a lily of the valley in the shade, by her young husband's side; and Ferdinand, with expanded chest, high head, and beaming eyes, gazed from his mother to his father, who stood for a moment in the midst, with a calm and tempered satisfaction on his countenance, thanking all, but with his mind evidently abstracted from that which was immediately passing around him. Who can say what were his sensations at that moment?--what was the strange turmoil of feelings in his bosom? There are times when the meeting of the past and the present is sensibly felt, from their strange contrast. We have all seen two rivers unite and flow on in peace, mingling their waters together so gradually that the line of their junction can scarcely be told; but many have beheld two torrents rushing down in fury, like contending armies, and, for a time, struggling in a whirlpool, ere they blend and rush away. Like that whirlpool, perhaps, were the emotions of his mind, when the long lapse of the dark and stormy past first met the gay and sunshiny present. But he was not without power over his own mind; and he conquered the tumult in a few moments. One glance at his wife, as she still clung to his arm; brief thanks to his friends; and then, turning to the Emperor, with the lady's hand in his, he bent the knee, and said, "I do you homage, my liege lord, not only with a true but with a grateful heart; and among all the causes of regret with which my long captivity has furnished me, there is none greater than that I have been prevented thereby from drawing a sword, which was once good, in behalf of your just rights. All is now in peace, thank God; but, should it be wanted, there is still strength in this old frame to go with you to the field; and, when it fails, here are young, hardy limbs,"--and he pointed to Ferdinand,--"which will never be found unwilling to

mount a horse and couch a lance in your Majesty's behalf."

"God grant that we never need them," replied the Emperor, raising him; "but should a wise head and a strong arm, a good sword and a stout heart, be needed in our cause, there is nowhere I will seek them more confidently than with the Count of Ehrenstein and his son."

"And now, knights and nobles," he continued, gaily, "we will bid you all adieu, and back to Spires; for, by my faith! we have been out so late at night, without pretext of war, or feud, or hunting party, that our fair Empress might think we were fooling away the hours with some rosy country maiden, had we not so strange a tale as this to tell her, of events that have been well worth the seeing.--Good night to all."

Thus saying, he quitted the chapel, followed by his train. For some minutes after, a buzz rose up from within, as of many voices speaking. Then came forth men and torches. Horses and litters were sought for, and away towards Hardenberg wound a long train, to which the gates opened, and spears and men-at-arms, and nobles in gay raiment passed over the drawbridge and through the dark archway. For an hour there were sounds of revelry within. A health, with a loud shout, was given in the great hall; and while many prolonged the banquet and drained the cup to a late hour, two young and graceful figures, lighted by a lamp, moved slowly along one of the wide corridors of the castle. The gentleman held a lamp in his hand, and gazed down upon his fair companion; the lady, with both hands circling his arm, bent her eyes on the ground, and trod softly, as if in fear of her own foot-falls. Bertha, the gay maid, stood at the end of the passage, and opened the door for them to pass through. She closed it when they were gone; and then, clasping her hands together, she bent them backwards, looked up half sighing, half laughing, and said, "Well, they are happy at last.--Lackaday."

CHAPTER XLIV.

The public is a body very much like that which assembles round a dinner table, and the wise host will cater for all. For some the substantial joints, for some the *hors d'œuvres* are necessary, and some will dwell long upon the dessert, which others will not deign to taste. Those need not eat, who do not like it; and thus, with the explanations at the end of a long tale, we may say to the reader, close the page if you have heard enough. In the case of many, imagination will supply all gaps, explain all obscurities, far better, probably, than the writer can; at least, that skilful limner will use brighter colours than any that the artist can employ; but with many another man, on the contrary, fancy requires a leading hand; or curiosity exacts a full account of what the author himself intended. For such, I must give at least one more scene, and that shall be in the same place whence we first set out,--the castle of Ehrenstein.

It was in the great old hall there--that hall so long deserted, or only tenanted for an hour or two, to be again abandoned. Its aspect, however, was now changed; the mould and damp had disappeared from the walls and columns; rich stained glass in the windows, receiving the full light of the summer sun, poured a flood of glorious colours across the pavement; wreaths of flowers wound around the massive pillars; green boughs and glittering armour hung upon the wall; and, though the serving men, from time to time, looked round with habitual dread at any sudden sound, yet the chief party, which remained in the hall after the mid-day meal, was full of gay life and cheerful happiness.

That party was small in number compared with those we have before seen in the same mansion; for the retainers of the house, though lately increased in number, had withdrawn, and left the lord of the castle and his family alone. Old Seckendorf, indeed, still occupied a seat amongst the rest, but the fact was, that the stout aged knight, after a morning spent in hard and vigorous exercise, had eaten and drunk to repletion, and was now nodding away the hour of digestion with his head leaning on his hand. At the head of the table, sat the old Count of Ehrenstein himself, with ineffaceable traces of cares and labours still visible on his cheek and brow, his hair white as snow, and his beard and eyebrows somewhat grey, but with a clear light in his keen eye, the rose upon his cheek, his frame firm and strong, and a hand that could raise a cup rounded with wine untrembling to his lips. Through all and above all sparkled that living grace which never dies; which age cannot wither, nor time touch; which death itself--as those who have marked the clay of men kindly and cheerful in their nature, must know well--which death itself, I say, gives over to corruption undiminished--the grace which an elevated, generous, and noble spirit spreads through the whole frame that contains it.

By his side sat his long-lost but well-beloved wife, who now, in the garments of her rank and station, freed from grief, anxiety, and apprehension, had recovered from the grasp of time a great portion of that beauty for which she had once been famous. Her eyes were turned upon the face

which she had so constantly loved, her hand rested near his, as if ready to touch it, and assure herself that he was there indeed; and the half opened lips, when he spoke, showed how she drank in his words, and how musical to her ear was the voice which she had once deemed stilled in death.

Near them were another pair, in the first fruition of life's brightest hopes, Ferdinand and Adelaide. His face was all brightness; his joy was at its full; care and sorrow had no hold upon his heart; from his own bosom spread forth a light that brightened all things; and the world, and every object it contained, seemed instinct with joy, and lustrous with happiness. Man's nature is not more susceptible of pleasurable emotions than woman's, and, indeed, perhaps the finer delights, the more delicate enjoyments which she feels, are to him unknown; yet, as an equivalent, those very fine movements of the spirit, which are the source of so much delight, are often the cause of shadowy afflictions. Man can enjoy to the full, woman seldom, without some vague sensation of a different character,—it may be melancholy, it may be regret, it may be fear-mingling even with the cup of joy, perhaps to diminish, perhaps to heighten the flavour,—which I know not.

The lady's face full of satisfaction, her beautiful eyes beamed with joy; but yet—oh, that there should ever be but yet—those eyes would sometimes turn thoughtfully towards the ground, and a shade would come over that angelic face; it could not be called a cloud, it was so light, so evanescent. Perhaps the reader may divine, without explanation, the cause of that vague shadow, or, at all events, a word will give him a clue. Her father was not there; and memories of his fate and his loneliness would interweave themselves with the warp of thought, and chequer with darker figures the bright web of her own happiness.

One more figure completed the group,—it was that of good Father George, now prior of his order; the abbacy he had declined; although, since the events we have lately narrated, the worthy but weak Lord Abbot had died—it was whispered from a surfeit, of a very nice but dangerous animal, called in the language of the country "*Nine-eyes*," which has slain almost as many great men as the sword. The good monk hardly looked as fresh and well as when first we beheld him, for he had lately passed through some scenes of great excitement; and it is a curious fact, that men of advanced life, who generally are less susceptible of strong emotions, suffer more severely than others when they do feel them. Nevertheless, during the meal he had been more gay than usual, and now he was prolonging the conversation aloud with the Count, while, from time to time, Ferdinand and Adelaide spoke together in low tones, of things which referred only to themselves.

"Ah! my good lord," said the Prior, "if the verse-maker Ovid had lived in these days, he might have added more than one book to his *Metamorphoses*, and, in this very place, might have found matter for many a long and ponderous verse. We have all, indeed, undergone transformation—you from a jester to a count; I from a poor monk to a rich prior; and you, my good youth, from a stripling to a married man. Nor amongst the least is the change of this old hall. Why, not two months ago, that is when last I saw it, it was all dark and mouldy, the stone-work peeling away, the rafters rotting and inclined to fall, with nought in it but the old banners and the great chair of state. Men were afraid to tread it for fear of spectres, and the whistling wind, the bats, and the dust, were its only tenants. Now it looks as gay and as sunshiny as a bridal banquet-chamber, with its gay garlands and festive flowers, and all fears seem laid aside in its new freshness.

"Nay, not quite all fears," answered the Count; "and I believe they never will be; for there is nothing so enduring as traditional terror. From time to time, some of the men will look around over the left shoulder, whenever the name of ghost or apparition is mentioned; and often have I seen a merry tale interrupted in the midst, by one man being seized with fears and infecting all the rest. But I do not much mind that. At present, their terror does not go to an inconvenient length; and with the passing days it will wear down to a calm and wholesome superstition, which may have its advantages. Doubtless, too, those who know all the secrets of the place, will whisper, amongst the rest, the causes of all they have seen, and if they do, the marvellous will suffer greatly, though doubtless, in winnowing truth from falsehood, some part of the chaff still stays with the corn."

"What were the causes, my dear lord?" asked Adelaide, fixing her eyes upon him; "I am well nigh as ignorant as the others; and though, as Ferdinand can tell you, I am not much given to fear—"

"When love is in the case, dear child," said the Count, interrupting her, with a smile. "But come, as a reward for that dear love, I will tell you all."

"It has been well rewarded already," she said, looking at her husband; "but yet I would fain know, and we will take the history as a pure grace. I guess at some things, and I know others, but still there is much that is dark and misty; and I have often heard, my dear lord and uncle, that woman's curiosity will not rest satisfied till all has been discovered. I see amongst us here in the hall at meal-time, many a scarred and weather-beaten face that I know not; but all their eyes seem to turn to you as if you were a saint, so that they must have known you long; and I hear them talk of distant lands and strange adventures, and therefore I deem they must have been your companions in the Holy Land."

"My good friends and fellow-soldiers of the Cross, my dear child," replied the old Count. "With

a noble train of such as these, now more than twenty years ago, I left my home to fight, in company with other lords of this and distant lands, for the deliverance of Christ's sepulchre. We were bound by a vow to give our banners to the wind upon the shores of Syria or Africa before a certain day; but in the fair city of Venice, the starlight daughter of the blue Adriatic, of which the heathen Venus was but an imperfect type, I met with one who made me long to break my oath--" and he laid his hand upon his wife's. "When she became a soldier's bride, however, she felt for a soldier's renown, and sadly, yet unobtrusively, parted from me, that I might fulfil the promise I had made. I went, dear child, leaving some faithful friends and followers to guard her hither, after our first child's birth; and then comes a time, on the events of which I will not dwell. You have already heard too much, perchance. Suffice it that I was wronged, and that the wrong has been forgiven. When I was captured by the Saracens, some of my brave companions fell, some were taken with me, some escaped to a castle of the Knights Hospitallers on the African shore. There I had left a certain sum of treasure; but my sword had plagued the infidels too sorely for them to let me go, without enormous ransom. The Order of St. John and my comrades who had escaped, trafficked eagerly with my captors to liberate me; but it was in vain; and in those distant lands some years were consumed in these fruitless endeavours. While they went on, I was permitted to see several of my friends; and a plan struck me, for using their services to gain the freedom of my companions in misfortune. At my desire, they bound themselves to serve the Order of St. John in arms, a certain number of years, upon condition that at the end of each man's time the Order should redeem from slavery one of their comrades of equal rank, they still retaining their homage to me. Thus, in the course of the last four or five years, all of my train who survived had been set free, the one part from the bondage of the infidel, the other from their engagements to the Order; and as each man thus obtained liberty, I sent him back hither with a sum of money, to watch over and guard my child; for I knew that he still lived, although I had wept for his mother as in the grave. To each I furnished a knowledge of the secrets of this place,--for it has secrets, as you will soon hear,--and bade them address themselves either to my reverend friend, Father Francis, or to my old henchman, good Franz Creussen, for farther information and directions. My own liberation seemed hopeless; not a ray of light broke in upon the darkness of my fate; till some good soul in England, where there are kind hearts and wealthy men, left a large sum to the Knights of St. John, for the purpose of ransoming the prisoners of the Cross. Still, the sum demanded for me was very large: there were many who were suffering as severely as myself: the Knights did not think it just to redeem any one man at such a price; and I might have lingered still in Saracen bonds, had not my noble friend, Frederick of Leiningen, come over to war in behalf of the Order; and, when he heard of my state, gave up all the recompense that was his due from the Hospitallers, to make up the amount of my ransom, with what the Grand Master had already offered to give. When the news first reached me that I was free, I cannot tell you--for I am not a learned man, like my good brother--all the strange thoughts and considerations that came into my mind. I fancied, if I came back in my true character, supported by Count Frederick's power, and the sixty or seventy good warriors I had sent back, I should have to punish the guilty, as well as to reward the honest, and perhaps to war for my inheritance against my own blood. I am not a harsh or cruel man, my child, and the thought frightened me. I therefore bethought me to take some disguise; but what to choose I knew not. If I came back with shield and spear, as a follower of Count Frederick's, I felt sure my brother would recognise me at once in a garb which I had so often worn before his eyes. So I fell upon a jester's habit; for I had ever been fond of a smart speech and a gay joke, and in my young days could cope in his own coin with any fool of the imperial court. The dress was sent me before I joined my friend, that his followers might not know me in any other character; and I came hither in that garb, as you know.--But now, to turn back to the fate of those I had sent over before: three or four perished by the way, the rest arrived in safety. The first, immediately on their return to their native land, visited the cell of Father George, and from him received instructions how to act.--I know not, my reverend friend," and he turned to the good monk, "whether I read your intentions rightly; but it has always seemed to me that your design was to collect the men together in one body, to be ready for all emergencies; and that, foreseeing or hoping I should myself in time return, you wished by superstitious impressions to prepare my brother's mind for that event, and induce him to yield to me, willingly and cheerfully, all that he had wrongly assumed."

"Good faith! my dear son," replied Father George, "if the truth must be told, I, at first, had no design, like many another man who is supposed to act upon well-digested schemes of policy; when, if put upon his truth and honour, he would acknowledge that circumstances suggested deeds. I hid the men in the old vaults, when first they arrived, because I knew not what else to do with them. Some of the people of the place saw them, and took them for ghosts; so I said, 'In Heaven's name, let them be ghosts!' It was a better mode of concealment than any I could devise. Then, again, as their numbers increased, it was necessary to provide them with food. My poor old trembling hands could not carry up all that was necessary; and therefore I applied to good Franz Creussen, who, I knew, would supply, and not betray. With him the whole business of the apparitions was matured; and from the key which you gave me long ago of the private passages, other keys were made, to give the good men exit and entrance when they pleased."

"Ay," said the Count, "it is of those private passage I was about to speak. You must know, my dear child, that when the old castle was pulled down, some two hundred years ago, and a new one built in its place, a famous architect was employed, who did not live to see his whole designs completed, but was buried under one of the chambers, where his tomb now stands. His son continued the work to a conclusion, and the plans have never been made known to any but the lord of this castle and his eldest son. Ere long, I will lead Ferdinand through the whole of the building, and will show him the map thereof, which lies in a niche of the architect's tomb. Suffice

it to say, that the whole of this vast structure, solid as it seems, and solid as it indeed is, in reality, is double; there is as much beneath the surface of the rock as above it. Every wall has its passage; between the ceiling of one chamber and the floor of another, are rooms, and halls, and staircases; and there is no part in the whole inhabited portion of the castle of Ehrenstein, that I could not reach without showing myself to one mortal eye of all those who are moving about in the clear and open day. The great extent of the building, the masses of its towers and walls, the cornices and mouldings, the buttresses and turrets, conceal all the contrivances which were resorted to in its construction. No eye gazing on it from without asks, 'with what chamber communicates that loophole?' Or, 'why is there so great a space between one range of windows and another?' All is in such good keeping, that all seems natural and ordinary; and by means of these rooms and passages, you and yours have been surrounded for the last five years, when you thought yourselves most alone, by a body of men daily increasing, who, at a word, would have seized the castle in their rightful lord's name. Such were the circumstances when I myself arrived. I soon gathered, from what I heard, that the old hall had been deserted, on account of rumours of apparitions, and, having held frequent communication with my friends here after my liberation, I easily divined the cause. More information, however, was required, and that information I gained when I undertook to watch in this hall with you, my son. From that moment my course was determined, my path clear. I suffered events to take their course, but added numerous warnings to my brother to soften his heart, to awaken remorse, and to induce him to do right, without a struggle, when the moment came. In your own secret marriage, my dear children, I acquiesced, from feelings I cannot well define nor describe. First, if ever there was one who won upon the heart at first sight, it is this dear girl; and next, there was in my bosom a vague unwillingness to strike the very blow I meditated, a lingering anxiety for some excuse to pardon and forget. I gladly seized that which was offered me; and however watchful and ready to step in and save my child, should need be, yet I was not displeased to see him somewhat tried by difficult circumstances, ere the day of his fortunes became unclouded and serene. You may now range the events and their causes easily for yourselves, for I have explained all that is needful to the right understanding of the past."

While the Count had been speaking, old Seckendorf had roused himself from his slumber, and was listening attentively; but when a pause ensued he exclaimed, "Ay, that accounts for many a good ghost, my lord, but the one I saw was a real ghost, I will swear; for you had not arrived at the castle then. Tell me that I would not know a man-at-arms from a shadow! Pooh! pooh! I am too old a soldier for that."

"Doubtless, just such another ghost as the rest," replied the Count, while Father George listened to the quiet smile.

"Not a whit of it," cried Seckendorf, "it made no more noise than a cat, and walked through the door as if it had been air.--I'll call Bertha--Bertha saw it too," and striding to the door of the hall, the old man shouted for our pretty friend at the top of his voice,--"Bertha, Bertha!" he exclaimed; "some of you knaves send the girl hither. Devil take the girl! any one ought to hear my voice at the top of the west turret."

"She is busy, Sir, I fancy," answered one of the men without; "but I will call her for you;" and at the same moment the voice of Father George exclaimed, "Herr von Seckendorf, come hither again. What would you say, if I were the ghost?"

"Pooh! nonsense!" exclaimed Seckendorf bluntly, "I won't believe it."

"It is nevertheless true," answered Father George; "I was crossing the end of the hall in the dusk to visit my young friend, Count Ferdinand, here, when I saw you and Bertha together: I heard her scream, but, guessing what was the occasion, took no notice, and went upon my way. You may remember that you found me in his room; and as to my silent step, I should think you had heard often enough from Count William, that 'the noiseless sandal of the church reaches higher places than the clanking heel of the man-at-arms;' at least, so he was wont to say. He may think differently now."

Adelaide had fallen into thought, as the good Father spoke, and the shade had come over her fair brow. But Father George observed the change, and, going over to her side, he said in a low voice, "Do not grieve for him, my dear child. It was but yesterday your father owned to me, that he had never known peace or happiness till now. He has chosen his fate; Heaven has granted him a period between the turmoil, the strife, the passions, the sins of the world, and that state where all is irretrievable, and all to be accounted for. Doubt not that he will use it to the best advantage; and if so, happy is it for him that those things which withheld him from better thoughts and higher purposes have been taken away. But should power, and reverence, and honour still have any hold upon his mind, or any value in his eyes, they are within his reach. The abbacy is still vacant, and undoubtedly at his disposal; I know not whether he will seek it or not, and by not one word will I endeavour to influence him. If he feels like me, he will avoid that which has been a snare to most men, and a fall to many; but, at all events, we will pray that God may grant him grace in any state to fulfil the duties of his station wisely--but here comes Bertha."

"There, there," cried Seckendorf; "say nought of the ghost; that's done. We'll have no more of them. But who, in fortune's name! has she got with her?"

"The Emperor's page," cried Adelaide; some degree of alarm mingling with her surprise.

Bertha, however, advanced up the hall with a timid and downcast look, and glowing cheek, not at all with her usual gay and light-hearted air and countenance; her steps were slow and hesitating; her bright eye veiling itself under the sweeping lashes, and her hands, with the invariable sign of bashful hesitation, playing with the tassels of her bodice. Behind her came the page, with his plumed bonnet in his hand, and more of sheepishness in his air, too, than was usual with himself or any page of the day. But the matter was soon explained, though in somewhat broken sentences.

"Please you, my lord," said Bertha, presenting herself before the Count; "here's one of the Emperor's pages--"

"I was, pretty Bertha," interrupted the young man; "but I am now out of my pagehood."

"And he has come to ask a question," said Bertha.

"To which I have got an answer," said the page, twirling round his bonnet gaily, but casting down his eyes at the same time.

"Not yet, master Karl," rejoined Bertha, quickly; "I told you it must depend upon the will of my lord and lady."

"Oh, but they won't refuse if you wish it," cried the youth.

"Who told you I wished it?" exclaimed Bertha. "I only said that sooner than break your heart--and you know you swore more than twenty times that it would if I refused--I would marry you, just to save you from drowning, or a halter, or some other bad kind of death; but that is not to say that I wish it. On the contrary, I will do what my lord and lady think fit. I am quite passive, and do nothing but out of pure benevolence;" and she clasped her pretty hands before her, and rolled one thumb round the other with the most indifferent air in the world.

"Has inclination no share in it, my fair one?" said the Count, with a smile; "if so, I think I shall withhold my consent; for such indifferent marriages are never happy ones."

Bertha's cheek began to grow warm, and she answered, in a hesitating tone, "I can't say I dislike him, my lord--I like him as well as any other man."

"I must have something more than that, pretty Bertha," replied her lord, with a slight degree of malice. "I am too grateful for all you have done to serve those I love, to let you wed a man to whom your whole heart is not given. You must like him better than any other man, or never marry him."

"Well, perhaps I do like him a little better than most," answered Bertha, with a sigh at her confession.

"Well enough to make a very good wife, my lord the Count," interposed the page.

"Never believe that any woman will make a good wife who does not love her husband, young gentleman," rejoined the Lord of Ehrenstein. "Do you love him with all your heart, Bertha?"

"Yes," whimpered the girl.

"Better than any?"

"Yes."

"Better than all? Would you give your life for him? Will you give it up to him?"

"Yes, yes, yes," she replied, and burst into a fit of tears.

"Well, then, you shall have a dower and a blessing," replied the Count; "and I doubt not you will, as he says, make him a very good wife; for the sauciest maidens sometimes turn out the humblest spouses. But what says the Emperor, my good youth?"

"Oh, he says that I may do as I like," replied the young man; "and, good faith! he could not well say less, for I believe he would have married her himself if, by good luck, he had not had another wife."

"Nay, that was a stroke of fortune on your behalf," answered the Count, laughing; "in the lands I have just left, he would have married her notwithstanding. But, by my faith! I think one such will prove enough for any man."

"Enough for me, my lord," said the page, with some grace; "I seek no more, and with her shall find happiness enough."

Bertha held out her hand to him with a warm smile, exclaiming, "Well, I do love you dearly."

"Right, right," cried the Count; "this is all right. We will take care of your household, Bertha. Let your own heart make the sunshine, and we will see that it shall have few worldly clouds; and

now, if long courtships be good, speedy weddings are better; so go your ways and settle the day between you, leaving all the rest to us."

Ere ten days more had passed, there was a marriage train wound down from the castle towards the little chapel in the wood; for Bertha, with a gay smile in her young mistress's face, had prayed that her wedding might be there celebrated, instead of the loftier building at the castle. The way was strewn with flowers by young girls from the village, and garlands hung amongst the branches of the old oaks and beeches. Light hearts and pretty faces gathered round; and nought was wanting to the happiness of Bertha but the presence of her young lord and the old Count, who had promised to give her to her husband. Both, however, had ridden away from the castle at an early hour, and good Franz Creussen had appeared in the bridal train as a substitute for the Count of Ehrenstein, to perform the part of parent to the fair bride. The Countess and Adelaide accompanied her, and when by the way she ventured to express her regret that her good lord was not to be present, Adelaide replied, with a smile, perhaps produced by a comparison between her feelings at the moment and those with which she had trod the same path herself as a bride, "Doubtless he will come, Bertha; for he went away this morning early, without telling any one his errand. I know he intended to be here."

I have, far away in the beginning of this true history, described a spot where the little chapel, and the door with its fretted stone-work, first appeared on the road descending from the castle, and when Bertha's bridal train reached that point, a group was seen in the green glade before the portal, somewhat more splendid than might have been expected to attend the bride-groom on his meeting with his betrothed. There were dresses of silk and velvet, of gold and embroidery, a banner or two waving above the horsemen, and a small group of men-at-arms behind, with lances raised, and limbs hanging drowsily, as if forming part of a scene in which they took no great interest. In front were four or five gentlemen on foot, and the first who came forward at a quick pace was the gay page. Behind, however, were seen the Count of Ehrenstein and his son, and near them, a step in advance, with head slightly bended, and all that air of dignity, if not of pride, which is so frequently generated by the habit of unlimited command, appeared the Emperor himself. He was speaking eagerly to the Count of Ehrenstein, as if they had just met, but when the two groups united, he took a kiss of Bertha's warm cheek, saying, "I have come unasked to your wedding, fair maid, out of love for yon youth and for you; make him a good wife as you have been a faithful friend, and if he makes you a good husband he shall never want advancement. Now let us forward to the ceremony: I will stand for his father who is far away in Vienna, and you will have a noble godfather, who will doubtless portion you as you deserve."

Bertha replied not, but by low obeisance; but, in the mean while, the Count of Ehrenstein had placed himself between his wife and his step-daughter, and, addressing himself to the latter, he said, "Let this be a joyful day for us all, my dear Adelaide! I have just returned from your father. Thinking that in such a case as this, we might well bury all bitter memories and unkind feelings of the past, I went over to the Abbey to see if he would quit his solitude, and join our little festival. Though he declined to quit his cell till his vows be taken and his fate sealed, yet it will give peace and comfort to your heart to know that our hands have clasped in peace, and that we have mutually agreed to remember nought but that we are brothers. All is forgiven. By me all shall be forgotten; if he remembers aught, it is the secret of his own heart, and between him and his God. He is seeking happiness in the only course where he can find it; and he bade me tell you that your joy and peace was the only earthly blessing that Heaven could bestow. No more shadows on that fair brow, then, my dear child; for though I have marked them with love, I have marked them with regret; and be assured that he who is most justly dear to you, except your husband, knows best the way to his own peace."

Adelaide replied not in words, but she took the old Count's hand, and kissed it tenderly, and then accompanied her husband and father-in-law to the chapel, where Bertha's marriage vows were speedily plighted.

"And now, my good lord Count," said the Emperor, "I have come to spend a day within your castle halls, bringing with me but a small escort; for I know that the good nobles of this land are somewhat fearful of encroachments upon their rights."

"Had you come with a whole host, my liege lord," replied the Count, "you should have been welcome; my heart is as free of fear as it is of guile. I have served your house ere now in war and in counsel, and you will see nought within my walls to make you doubt that I am ever ready to do so still. Were you a bad or an unjust monarch, which I know you not to be, you might, perchance, seek to infringe the rights, or disturb the peace of your vassals; but I do not think the first with whom you would begin would be the Count of Ehrenstein."

"Assuredly not," replied the Emperor; "and to say the truth, the object of my coming, noble friend, is to seek counsel and assistance from your experience in framing some system by which the rights and the happiness of all classes of people in this empire may be better secured. The private wars of the lands, the constant feuds that take place between cities and nobles, and between nobles themselves, as well as the condition of the peasantry, form a great evil, which requires some remedy. Count Frederick of Leiningen will join us this night, and we will consult together--not bringing preconceived opinions or unreasonable prejudices to council, and then fancying we deliberate, but considering well and calmly whether anything can be done, and if so, what had best be done to ameliorate the condition of the people, and the institutions of the realm."

They met as was proposed; and in the consultation of that night was drawn out the first sketch of that famous chamber of justice at Spires, to which all causes of contention and dispute were referred. Years passed, it is true, before the scheme was acted upon, but when once it was in full operation, it soon put an end to that almost anarchical state of which some scenes have been displayed in the foregoing pages.

Little more remains to be told. The latter years of the Count of Ehrenstein passed in peace; and, bowed with age, though scarcely sensible of decay, he fell quietly asleep at a more advanced age than is usually attained by men who have undergone such hardships, and endured such privations. Old Seckendorf, too, with the flame burning dimly over the lamp, passed far beyond man's allotted term. His body submitted to all the ordinary processes of age; withered away from that of the stout old knight to that of the decrepit and querulous old man, sank into the lean and slippered pantaloons, and thence, through life's last act, into the grave. His tombstone marks his age as 93; but the truth of the record may be doubtful, for no one could ever ascertain the precise year in which he was born. Bertha made a very good and joyous wife, retaining just sufficient of the playful malice of her youth to keep the waters of existence from stagnating; and Ferdinand and Adelaide of Ehrenstein went on to the end with the same bond of love between them which had encircled them in childhood, and been knit fast in youth. In the lavish spirit of strong affection, he had, as we have seen, made many a promise of enduring tenderness; but his honour was very dear to him, and, had he even felt inclined to break one of those dear engagements, he would have still held that a promise to a woman is even more binding than to a man. But Adelaide never had to remind him of one vow. Happily, her own high qualities, her deep devotion to himself, her gentleness, and the strong moving spirit of love which ruled her every action, deprived duty of all honour in the unwavering performance of each assurance he had given. Their hearts and their happiness shed their sunshine around them, and as the old retainers dropped away, others supplied their place, and inherit their veneration for their lord and lady.

Thus passed the days of the earthly inhabitants of the castle of Ehrenstein; its unearthly tenants disappeared with the return of the old Count to reclaim his own. Gradually the tales of spirits and apparitions became less frequent and more vague; but yet they have not entirely faded away from tradition; and the peasant returning home late at night, from market or fair, will pass the mouldering bridge with some awe, and fancy that he sees shadowy shapes and giant forms, when he looks up by moonlight to the crumbling walls and ruined towers of Ehrenstein.

FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): I shall adopt the word Count instead of Graf, as the English translation of the title; and shall also follow throughout the same course with regard to other honorary designations, as more convenient.

[Footnote 2](#): A door, precisely similar to that described, is still to be seen in the old castle of Baden-Baden.

THE END.

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