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AGNES OF BRAUNSBURG.

A LEGEND OF THE TYROL.

(From the Tablet.)

It was summer on the mountains, and in the glens of the Tyrol. The wooded crags of that romantic region re-echoed with the warblings of the feathered tribe as they revelled in the bright sunshine. The torrent rivers of the ancient Rhoetia ran, or rather leaped, rejoicing on their way, having at length thrown off the icy fetters which had so long enchained their sparkling waves. Bright are they all, those rivers of the Tyrol, and limpid as mountain streams ever are, but none of them brighter or purer than the silvery Falzau, as it rushes to the foamy embrace of the Adige, having first received the waters of the Pässever. There was sunshine on the river at early morn, and sunshine on the crags which towered above, crowned by the embattled walls of the Braunsberg. A cloud of radiance seemed to gather around the ancient fortalice, as its windows reflected the glory of the light, and its sharp angles and massive buttresses were all tinted with the rich radiance of the sunbeam.—Nature—though there all wild and stern—had donned the gladsome robe of summer, and all without was light and joy—on the river, and the cliff—the forest and the castle-keep—but within that stately dwelling there was sadness and unrest. The lady of the castle was oppressed by the grievous burden of a sorrow which none might share. Yet Agnes of Braunsberg was young and fair—ay, fair as the lily that blus her graceful head beneath the light footfall of the zephyr. Scarce two short months had passed since she had given her reluctant hand to a noble and wealthy husband, approved of by her mother, her only parent. Then why is Agnes sad? Why is the lustre of her soft hazel eye even now dimmed by the frequent tear? And wherefore is the peachy hue of her cheek already faded—gone for ever?—her form, too, has lost much of its graceful roundness, and the buoyant step of youth is grown heavy and tardy. What blight has fallen on her young heart, that thus she withers and pines away in the dreary solitude of hidden sorrow?

She had remained passive in the hands of her tire-women while they made her toilet, suffering them to adorn her as became her high rank, but when they had finished their task she at once dismissed them, and, throwing open a glass door opposite, she stepped forth on a stone piazza, hoping that the young day, and the sunbright beauty of the world around, might cheer and invigorate her drooping spirits. Leaving over the balustrade, she endeavored to fix her thoughts on the scene before her. Never had she beheld that noble panorama of mountain scenery wear so brilliant an aspect, and for a moment her heart throbbled with delight, not unmingled with wonder. Far below rolled the Falzau, its waters here and there tossed into foam by the projection of unseen rocks. The castle was perched upon the summit of a lofty pile of rock which there descended almost perpendicularly to the water's edge, its sides thinly clothed with shrubs and bushes, with here and there a stunted pine hanging, as it seemed, from some fissure in the rock. It was a grand, yet almost a terrific sight, causing a sensation of giddiness, to look down upon the restless river, where it toiled and fretted on its way to the neighboring Adige.

For a time the Lady Agnes bowed her soul in homage before the Almighty Fashioner of this so beautiful earth, but alas! for poor, selfish human nature! her thoughts speedily reverted to her own deep sorrow, and memory wandered far away to the scenes of her happy childhood, among the fresh green hills and smiling valleys of her native Suabia. Pressed down by the weight of accumulated woe, she bowed her head on the cold stone parapet, and murmured, almost aloud:

'My mother, my dear mother! would that I had died for thee on the day I accompanied Von Braunsberg to the altar, so that my death could have averted the ruin that awaited thee! Alas! alas! buoyed up with the hope of saving thee from utter and irretrievable ruin, and strengthened by the conscious fulfilment of my duty, I rashly deemed myself equal to the sacrifice.—But, oh fatal confidence! too late have I discovered how very weak I am! And thou, my mother! how cruelly hast thou been deceived in believing him touched with pity for thy misfortunes. Now—now that he hath secured this poor, worthless hand, which alone he coveted, and thinks no more of thee or thy necessities, and refuses to ratify his promises in thy regard. Ah, woe is me, I have then, bartered for an empty shadow—a mocking phantom, my hopes, my happiness—alas! my all!

As she thus spoke a strain of music arose on the still air, and Agnes started from her lethargy of woe: dashing away the tears that filled her eyes, she stood up at her full height, and gazed around for the musician. The sounds seemed to

come from the river, and, leaning once more over the parapet, she discovered a person in the garb of a wandering minstrel, seated on a ledge of rock at some distance below. In his hand was the mandolin, whose tinkling notes had so startled the baroness, and far down, on the beach, was seen a small and light shallop, moored to a creek.

Agnes listened entranced to the music, for the strain was one she had often sung in her own old home, and there was magic in every note. She listened, and all of the present was forgotten.—'The Tyrol and its wild and lonely beauty—nay, even the gloom of her wedded lot—her fears—her vain regrets—all—all had faded from her mind as by the stroke of a wizard's wand, and she was again young Agnes Winstelhaul, the queen of her native village—the life of her pleasant home, and the love of a hundred hearts.—Suddenly the stranger looked up, whether by accident or design, and Agnes, acting on the impulse of the moment, beckoned him to ascend, pointing to some rude steps cut in the solid rock, which, at no great distance from where he sat, wound up to the piazza where she stood.

The stranger arose, and with much difficulty obeyed, for his limbs seemed crippled by age, and as Agnes marked the slow and heavy step with which he dragged himself up the steep ascent, she half repented her invitation. Having reached the top, the minstrel bowed low to the youthful baroness. His figure was slightly bent, yet through the folds of his long cloak was visible the perfect symmetry of its proportions. His face was not to be seen, being almost entirely concealed by a closely drawn hood.

Agnes pointed to a seat, but the *minnesinger* silently signified that in such a presence he preferred standing.

'Sir minstrel!' said Agnes, 'I would know whether thou art of Suabia, that thus thou playest, with the feeling of a true Suabian, an old Suabian melody? Truly, my heart hath hung upon thy notes, for they are the first that have spoken to mine ear of home since I have sojourned in this strange land.'

She sighed heavily, and the minstrel's voice trembled as he replied in tones so low as to be barely audible: 'Dost thou so fondly remember thy fatherland, young lady of Braunsberg? Ah me! that one so fair and good should have deserted the country of her birth, and the green graves of her fathers, for this the stranger's dwelling—ah me!—ah me!—but woe is mine should the Baron Von Braunsberg be within sight or hearing, for well I know that he loveth not the country of his bride, and would have her forget it with all its recollections.'

'Holy Saints!' cried Agnes, 'how knowest thou this?—but as I live thou sayest true, for were I not assured that my lord is some leagueway hence this hour I would not dare to invite hither one whom I believe to be a Suabian. Speak, good minstrel! knowest thou aught of mine honored mother, the widowed lady of Winchelaus? if so, oh tell me of her, I implore thee.'

'Alas the day!' returned the stranger mournfully, in his low cautious tones, 'alas the day! lady, I am he that can best inform thee of all that concerns that noble but most afflicted lady. At noon but three days since I parted from her, and come hither charged with her blessing to her fondly beloved child. Poor lady! she hath been driven from her home by a merciless tyrant, and was fain to take up her abode in the dwelling of thy foster-sister, the young wife of the good Paul Ratter. And yet, amid all her grievous affliction, her chief sorrow is for thee, and she crieth ever and anon, 'alas, alas, and for this—this—have I sold my child—yea, my treasure—into worse than Egyptian bondage. I have given her over body and soul to a man who has no heart—no bowels of compassion—my child—Oh Agnes, my child! and from morn till night she weeps and will not be consoled.'

During this heartrending recital the wretched Agnes had remained standing with clasped hands and closed eyes before the stranger, but when it was ended she raised her hands and eyes to heaven, and cried aloud: 'Great God! have mercy on my mother—my poor, poor mother! punish me as thou wilt, but oh, take pity on her age, and lighten the load of her tribulation.' She was silent though her pale lips still moved in mental prayer, and the stranger spoke once more:

'And is there none else for whom the Lady Agnes would inquire? Hath Suabia not one other being worthy of a moment's thought?'

A deep blush instantly suffused the pale cheek of Agnes, and her eyes filled with tears, but her glance was downward, and she spoke not a word. The minstrel went on:

'Must I, then, force myself back on thy failing memory? The blush deepened on the lady's cheek, for the stranger now spoke in a different voice, and its tones were but too, too familiar, but still she was silent, and still her eyes rested on the flags beneath.

'Look at me, Agnes! and say what dost

thou recognize these altered lineaments? Look here!'

Agnes raised her eyes—a moment she gazed on the now uncovered features, and the blood, receding from her face, left it paler even than before, but she resolutely turned away her head. 'Altered, ay, altered in very deed,' she muttered. After a moment's painful silence she spoke again, though without looking at the face which for months she had been laboring to efface from the tablet of her heart. 'And am not I, too, changed, Rodolph? Say, hath not sorrow written a sad tale on my features as on thine? Alas! friend of my childhood, I suspected that it was thee who had run such risk to win a sight of Agnes. From the first word I heard thee speak, I guessed the secret, disguised as thy voice was. Ah? it was once the voice of my heart, and could never be changed beyond my knowing.—But go, Rodolph! tarry not here—danger is round and about thee—go—go.'

But Rodolph heeded not the warning. His pale and sunken cheek grew paler still, and his dark eyes were fixed in deep and painful thought. 'My voice was once the voice of her heart!' he murmured, as though forgetting that he was not alone, 'and she doth not even offer me her hand—no, not even that common civility can she afford to Rodolph. And yet she was wont to own that she loved me, and we were betrothed in the sight of heaven when I went to fight my country's battles, and on my return she was to have been my wife. Since that parting I have not seen her, for when I again reached my home, I found not her—she was a wedded wife and gone with her wealthy lord to another land. And now when I have sought her presence, though it be but to say farewell forever, she bath no word, no look of kindness to bestow on one who loves her more, a thousand times more than his own life. Yet for her—so cold, so pitiless, I have pined in sorrow and in silence, till youth, and health, and strength are fading fast away. Fool, fool that I have been.'

He was turning away as if to depart, when Agnes laid her trembling hand on his arm, and he saw that her face was bedewed with tears.—'He had not time to speak till she faltered out—'I adjure thee by our common hopes of salvation, Rodolph Von Meinher, that thou tempt me not beyond my strength! knowest thou not that, as the wife of another, I cannot bear thee as of old? blame me not, therefore, but rather pity me, and in mercy refrain from all allusion to those feelings which in bygone days were equally shared by both!—remember that by thought we sin as well as by word or act—suffer not thy mind, then, to harbor thoughts that may delude thy soul, nor dwell on joys that are gone for ever! Tell me, rather, of my mother, and let me thank thee for all thy generous care of her. And yet,' she added, slowly and in an under tone, 'and yet it might be better for my peace of mind that another than thee had ministered to her wants. But go on—thou who hast been as a son—yea, more than a son to my poor desolate mother—thou who hast, as I well know, made many sacrifices on her behalf—why should I not thank and bless thee?—yea, Rodolph, I do bless thee—mayest thou—oh, mayest thou be happy!'

Alas, her own quivering lip and the ghastly paleness of her face too plainly told that for herself, at least, hope was extinct. Seeing that the knight was about to speak to speak with an air, too, of impassioned tenderness, she quickly went on, as though fearing to hear him again:

'For me, Rodolph, I have but to bend my stubborn will to the fate which Providence hath allotted to me. Yet I complain not—nark me, Rodolph, I complain not. It is not permitted me to open my heart to thee, if even it were bursting with anguish; and she pressed her hands so tightly upon it that none might doubt the reality of the pangs she would fain conceal. 'I will be resigned, then, Rodolph; but friend of my early days—companion of my happy hours—my tutor—my champion—my more than brother—as a last favor I ask of thee ever again to hazard thy precious life, and my peace of mind—yea, my life, too, by venturing hither.—And now I have but one word to add ere we part—for ever—tell my dear mother that I will endeavor to be happy—yea, happy,' she almost groaned, 'and let her not reproach herself, for as much as what I have done was with mine own free consent. God bless her—and thee, too, Rodolph—may angels guard thee now and forever. Away now, if thou dost ever love me, for thy presence here distracts me. Farewell for ever on this earth—in yon bright heaven we shall, I trust, meet to part no more.'

She was moving away when the knight threw himself on his knees before her, grasping her robe with one hand, while with the other he attempted to take her hand which she steadily withheld.

'What! not even one touch of that hand I once deemed mine own—not one look of pity for him who hath loved thee—ay! and loves thee

still beyond all else this world contains. Oh Agnes, Agnes! is it thus we meet—thus we part after all that hath come and gone! Can the heartless vows given to that unprincipled, unfeeling old man who hath proved himself so very a wretch—can they annul the promises, the friendship, the love of years? Ah, had not Rodolph been far away this hated marriage had never been, for every acre that remains of my patrimony had been sold or mortgaged to rescue thy mother from the ruin that hath since overtaken her. Thy mother—dost thou remember we were wont to call her our mother?'

Overcome by the remembrance of hopes so long cherished, now so utterly blighted, the tears burst forth from his agonised heart, and, covering his face with both his hands, the young man wept like a very child. And Agnes stood leaning against the wall for that support which she felt necessary—her face pale as the sculptured marble—her eyes sunk and lustreless as they rested on the bowed-down form of the knight. Yet she could not weep—her heart was pierced by incurable wounds, and quivered in every fibre, yet tears were denied her. It is ever a sad sight to look upon the tears of manhood, for we know that the grief that wrings them forth must be, indeed, mighty and overwhelming; but when the unhappy Agnes looked on him who then knelt before her—when she remembered the lightsome heart, and later the martial pride, which had been his characteristics in days past—when she recalled his gay and soldier-like bearing—his form erect in the pride of early manhood, now low and drooping—when she remembered the pleasure she had been wont to take in the admiration that followed him wheresoever he moved—when too-faithful memory conjured up before her tortured mind the happy days when they were all the world to each other—painting, too, in vivid colors his unshaken devotion and protecting tenderness—above all, the services he had rendered to her mother, she longed to throw herself at his feet and pour out all her gratitude and all her sorrow. But no—no—it would only increase the more his ill-starred passion, which it was now the interest and the duty of both to quench for ever, and while her heart throbbled with mingled pity and affection, the voice of conscience, speaking within her soul, warned her to assume a firmness which she could not command, and to terminate at once an interview so harrowing and so fraught with danger. Not daring to approach Rodolph, she said, in a voice that vainly struggled for composure:

'Wherefore this utter abandonment, Rodolph? For shame that thou shouldst yield thyself to despair! bethink thee how all such weakness becomes a warrior-knight. Look at me, Von Meinher! behold how calm I am—and yet my poor weak heart is—is—' she paused—blushed—blaming herself for even that unfinished and surely unintentional admission; doubly mortified was she when she saw its effect, for the young knight started instantaneously from his kneeling posture, his cheeks glowing and his eyes flashing with the fire of former days.

'Thy heart is—what?' he passionately exclaimed. 'Speak, Agnes, speak—speak, I implore thee! Only one word of comfort do I ask—only assure me that I am not unpitied, not entirely forgotten, and I will go hence and bless thy goodness—I will go seek to lose life and memory together in the din of war!'

His fond appeal was unanswered, for Agnes, full of repentance for even her half-confession of sympathy, had suddenly made her retreat through the glass door, closing it after her with a sort of desperate resolution, as though fearing he might be tempted to follow her. In her implicit obedience to the dictates of duty she steeled her heart against her own sufferings as well as his whom she found to be still dangerously interesting.

For a moment Rodolph was tempted to pursue her, though it were to the presence of her revengeful and jealous lord, but this frantic resolution was soon replaced by stern resentment, as he recalled the seeming disregard of his feelings testified by Agnes during their brief interview.—Rapid in his decisions and just as prompt in carrying them out, the indignant youth hastily snatched his mandolin, gathered his long cloak around him, sprang down the steep descent towards his shallop with the speed of an Alpine hunter, making strange contrast to the affected feebleness which had made his ascent appear so very toilsome. Outraged love and a stinging sense of injustice made him desperate, lending a reckless swiftness even to the buoyant and elastic step of youth. As he threw himself breathless into his boat, he turned a look of angry contempt on the frowning walls above, and vowed never again to waste a thought of tenderness on her who had so spurned his affection.

Alone in her richly furnished chamber the unhappy Agnes gave way to the overflowing softness of her nature. Though conscious that she could not, dared not have acted otherwise than she had done, yet her exquisitely tender heart

was moved with compassion for the unmerited sufferings of one so long, so truly loved.

'Ah, Rodolph,' she fervently exclaimed, as, burying her head in a pile of cushions by which she had knelt, she wept in the fullness of her sorrow, 'ah Rodolph, little dost thou know of the workings of this poor heart; couldst thou see it laid open, even for a moment then wouldst thou cease to blame me as I know thou dost, and thy generous soul would pity me. But, oh, just and righteous Providence, suffer not my weak heart to repine or murmur at thy dispensations. Grant me, O God, that I may forget him—forget him quite—that I may cheerfully bow all the powers of my soul to the faithful discharge of my duty to thee, and to him whom thou hast given me for a husband.'

She remained some time in silent prayer, and having attained some degree of composure, she rose and again walked forth on the balcony.—Her first glance was directed to the Creek below, but the boat was no longer there, and falling again upon her knees, she poured out a fervent supplication for the spiritual and temporal welfare of him whom she yet firmly trusted she should see no more on earth.

While pacing her room to and fro, lost in the depth of her own sad thoughts—her beautiful features now flushed, now pallid, and the fitting fire of her eye betraying the restless mind within, her glance suddenly rested on certain of her rings, which, in her eagerness to have her toilet completed, she had entirely overlooked, and knowing her lord's excessive love of jewelry, she took them up, saying with a bitter smile, as she placed them one after another on her taper fingers:

'He boasted to me that these rich baubles had belonged in succession to his two former wives, and he told me that the beauty of the wearer, differing in its kind, had outshone the lustre of the gems. Truly they made but a sorry disposal of their rare charms, these by-past ladies of Braunsberg! Their baronial honors, too, were of short duration, for it seems that five years have scarcely past since Joachim brought hither his first wife, a Milanese lady of high birth. And I, the humble successor of those high-born beauties—! who in an evil hour took their place, how long shall I reign in this lordly prison? God alone knoweth. He will, I trust, give me strength to fulfil even a protracted term of useless duty—of duty, oh! how painful. But, sweet Mary mother! she suddenly exclaimed, 'what meaneth this? What had become of that fatal ring wherewith Joachim wedded me? All the others are here—it alone is wanting! But what—who can have taken it hence? it the most important though least valued of all!'

Surprised and alarmed she summoned her attendants, but they all denied any knowledge of the ring, and Agnes knew that none of them had ever yet deceived her. A vigorous search was set on foot and continued till every nook and corner had been examined, but the ring was not to be found, and Agnes became really apprehensive, from a knowledge of her husband's darkly suspicious nature. Her maidens had not yet quitted her presence when a door was thrown open, and the baron rushed in as quickly as the infirmities of age permitted. An exclamation of terror burst from the blanched lips of the baroness, for his countenance, at all times repulsive, was now inflamed with the most deadly passion. The frightened attendants drew back on all sides, while the enraged baron approached his wife, and seizing her by the arm, shrieked out:

'Ha! then, thou, too—young as thou art—hast given thyself up to evil courses! I deemed thee innocent, wretch that thou art—I believed thee free from guile—but I have found thee out—I have caught thee! I have caught thee!' he repeated in a still louder voice, shaking her fiercely by the shoulder. 'So! seest thou this, base minion? And he held before her astonished eyes the identical ring so lately missed.—'Would none other pledge content thy guilty love than the ring wherewith I, in my folly, did espouse thee. But I have punished the vile paramour—yea, I have sent him to his reckoning with his sins reeking on his head. Ha! ha! he screamed in hideous laughter, 'I tore his dainty fore-gift from his dead finger!'

It never entered the mind of Agnes that he could possibly have spoken of any other than Rodolph, and shaking of the fierce grasp of the baron with the strength of a maniac, she started suddenly from her seat.

'Thou hast killed him then?' she wildly exclaimed. 'Barbarian! was it not enough that thou hast blighted his hopes and darkened his young life, making earth a blank to him, but thou must finish the deed, and pierce that noble heart already bleeding from a ghaping wound.—Accursed be thy hand, oh, Joachim, for thou hast murdered an innocent man!'

These words, uttered with fearful energy, caused her maidens to tremble for what might follow, and they were scarcely spoken when the baron, frenzied by this supposed confirmation of his suspicions, once more caught hold of his unhappy