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THE WITCH OF OAKDALE; OR, THE WAYS OF PROVIDENCE.

(From the Catholic Telegraph.)
CHAPTER XIII.—REPENTANCE.

A few weeks had passed since the destruction of Rabenfels' castle; the air of the late autumn became chilly and cold, when early one morning the bell of the graveyard of Nettershausen rang slowly and mournfully through the Mindel Valley.

"What solemn sound was that?" asked Knight Gassler, lying sick and wounded in a lonely shepherd's hut, broken down in body and soul; and Veit Jurgan, who attended the patient, answered sulkily:

"They carry the body of the dead Burgomaster of Nettershausen to its final resting place. The gloomy procession will pass here. Do you hear the deep and solemn song of the black-robed pall-bearers?"

The knight raised himself, as well as he could to the window, while the deep sounding burial hymn rang mournfully upon his ear, leaving, with the slow sounds of the bell, a strange impression in the knight's breast. With a deep drawn sigh, and fully exhausted, Sigismund sank back upon his hard couch, while an exclamation of deadly terror trembled upon his ashy lips. The Fish Veit seemed to participate in the knight's convulsing agitation. For he also stood rebuffed and deeply moved by this solemn scene, and gazed with a vacant eye upon the haggard face of his companion in sin. A deep silence reigned in the miserable hut till the burial song had died away, and the bell had ceased its ringing.

"Now the unmerciful grave has taken the booty in its cold embrace," murmured at last the knight, and wiped his hollow hand across his cold brow. "What think you, Veit?" he asked, looking with an anxious gaze at him of Costnitz, and laughing with despair, "will the coffin soon claim this body as its victim?"

"Sir Knight, you speak in fever heat," replied the formerly pseudo monk with quivering lips, betraying only too well the cold terror that had taken possession of his conscience.

Then he asked, to bring the conversation upon other topics:

"Shall I relate to you what happened at the configuration of Rabenfels? You have been lying unconscious ever since, and this is the first day that you have regained your senses."

"Ah, I know what happened there better than the Veit of Costnitz," replied the knight, "but oh, what would I give if it was not so. Then my heart would not be so heavy, as I have to feel its weight now in these days of sickness. Wee be to me, I can not forget a moment that I see the imploring spirit of my Edeltrudis, my cast off wife! Sky high blazed the fiery tongues, and the wailing cries of the servants rang woefully upon the awfully illuminated night. Lucinda had cast herself into the abyss of fire; I am the only cause of her terrible death. Eliza called loudly, while her disarranged hair floated wildly down her shoulders, for her beloved sister; she also never returned from the burning castle. But I had stolen the Count's boy; he should feel the vengeance of the despised sutor to his mother's hand!—With curses upon my lips and thoughts of terrible revenge in my heart, I crossed the courtyard to gain the outside of the castle. Hardly had my feet touched the drawbridge,

when I saw the ghastly features of the old witch before me. My feet trembled; I was awfully frightened by the sudden appearance of the old hag, and yet I tried to pass her. But with the quickness of a thought she snatched the boy from my arms. A terrible blow from her magic hand made me lose my balance, and the next moment I lay at the bottom of the deep ditch.—At that instant the roofing of the castle broke down with a thundering noise. I looked up, when oh, terrible! Death, why was not that the last moment of my miserable existence? I saw the spirit and heard the voice of my cast off Edeltrudis! Senseless I sank into the fist of the ditch and only awoke on the evening of the next day, when my exclamations of deadly agony betrayed to you my whereabouts and brought you to my rescue."

"Verily," the Fish Veit interrupted him, "no honest person would have suspected that you had made the muddy ditch your resting place. And by my poor soul, you may thank your stars that you only broke one leg and escaped without further injury. You might have broken your neck or your back, and then, farewell to you forever."

"I have thought of that myself," muttered the knight with a choking voice, and looked musingly into the black eyes of his companion. "And if it had happened, what would have become of me? Veit, Veit, the burgomaster of Nettershausen lies also buried! When I hunted in the dense forests a short time ago, he was with the crowd of my jolly huntsmen, as bright and healthy as the deer that crosses with lightning speed the deep ravine of the forest. The burgomaster is—dead!"

The knight lapsed into silence. The Fish Veit gave no answer, and, lost in the contemplation of the past, he bound the wound on the right leg of the knight so tight that the latter became uneasy, and prayed the former to be more gentle with his wounded limb. At last the knight continued:

"Veit, did you understand the song of the pall-bearers? 'he who lives right has a happy future awaiting him; but he who lives in sin will be doomed to an awful eternity?' Will we continue in our bad deeds? Shall we in the future lead such a life as we have in the past? I, for my part, am steeped only too deep in my many misdeeds. The funeral and the hymn of the carriers have recalled in my memory the many damnable actions of my past life. I hear the wailing of my child, whom I had torn from the loving arms of a despairing mother. I see Edeltrudis, whom I cast unmercifully from me, kneeling before my feet, her hands raised in supplication! And then—what horrible acts I committed at Rabenfels! The storm of that terrible night, which the Almighty sent, to make a better man of me, I abused for the base passions of my soul. Lucinda dead; Eliza buried beneath the ashes, and the boy in the arms of a witch, and—I cast down upon a miserable couch, by a horrible fever that tears asunder my black soul.—Ha, Veit, the burgomaster of Nettershausen only a short hour ago entered the cold ground, and his soul has confronted its Judge."

The knight ceased in his speech, and gazed with a look of despair upon his broken limb. Veit himself kept an ominous silence, a sign of the deep-felt pangs of his conscience. At last he muttered in an undertone, a hot tear stealing from his black eyes.

"What is to be done?"

At this moment the grey head of a venerable old man appeared at the little window. The knight trembled with affright.—Then rang the voice in the deepest bass:

"*Miserere nostri, Domine, secundum magnum misericordiam tuam!*" Sir knight, the cup of your bad deeds is full to overflowing and yours is a terrible punishment. Your evil actions have been as numerous as the leaves of these trees and what you did at Rabenfels the Omniscient only knows. Mend your evil ways, repent your sins, become a better man and seek forgiveness and grace at the feet of the Redeemer of the whole human race. In large throngs the German knights wander to Palestine! Make the solemn vow to follow them, if God permit you to regain your health. At the holy sepulchre you may kneel down and weep, on the summit of the Mount of Olives pour your many sins into the chalice which the Lord drank to the last drop for our redemption. I will pray for your poor soul! May God have mercy on you!" And the next instant the venerable man had disappeared.

The knight burst out in scalding tears, and Veit was equally moved by this solemn admonition. Then trembled the pale lips of Gassler, "Yes, I will go to the Holy Land, in atonement for my acts of horror, and offer there my blood and life to the Lord, if he in his mercy will return to me a healthy, strong arm, and heal me of my wounds!"

"Veit was satisfied, and resolved to pass his life under the rigid regulations of some monastery as the lowest servant; till Knight Sigismund would return. But the latter replied:

"Another duty is yours, Veit; and if you do not fulfill it you will never find rest for your poor soul. You have sold my child, my infant daughter, to a band of gypsies. Seek day and night; and if you find her take her in your care and educate her in a good Christian manner, till I return from the holy conflict.—Also my wife, if she should be among the living still, you must incessantly search for. Tell her that I have repented, and that I will see her again, if not here, yet in the land of mercy and peace. But I am joining in the great war against the infidels, and, perhaps, the rare fortune will be mine, that I may save the noble Count Walter, the hospitable friend whom I betrayed, from the threatening and poisonous javelins of the Saracens; that I may crave forgiveness at his feet, and if he will not forgive—oh, it is so hard to forgive—I will find my last hour in the midst of the wild battle. May God the Lord, watch over us and turn the bad we have committed to good."

Not many days had passed when one cold morning the Fish Veit of Costnitz entered into the smithshop of Hans Netter and ordered a fine armor for a noble knight. Gassler's condition had improved from day to day, his broken leg bid fair to become strong and stout within a short time, and his health had regained most of its former vitality.

From the stable of the dead burgomaster a fiery war horse was purchased, and the cold winter was hardly giving way to early spring when the knight one fresh morning, armed to the teeth, vaulted into his saddle. Once more at parting Gassler laid his mailed hand upon the shoulder of his companion, who was looking up to him with sad eyes; once more he told him of his solemn duty, and wished him, while hot tears trembled in the strong man's eyes, success in his search. Veit handed to the knight his heavy battle ax, and called the Almighty's protection upon him. Sigismund Gassler departed. The Fish Veit followed him with his gaze till he was lost to his view in the far distance.

CHAPTER XIV.—THE BATTLE IN THE DESERT.

From the Red Sea to the banks of the Euphrates the desert of Syria is almost a dead space; and it seems as if the curse of the Almighty, who changed the beautiful plains of Siddim, as a punishment for the many deeds of its inhabitants, into sulphur, pitch and salt, was still resting heavy and pressing upon this great sandy surface. No blooming flower, no verdant tree; all dreary and desolate; the springs of the old shepherds' times have dried out or have become stagnant pools of sulphurous water. And when, here and there, from the beautiful valleys of Arabia Felix a variegated bird strays into this desert, he sinks soon, weary and dulled by the poisonous air, down upon the sand, becoming a welcome prey to the bloodthirsty hyena.

Only a few charming places, well known as the oases, greet the weary wanderer as he traverses the desert, as pleasant and delicious resting places. The Arab calls such a garden, as if planted in the wilderness by some fairy hand, "*El Wahat*." He holds the sweet spring, that refreshes and invigorates every surrounding flower and bush, in such high estimation that he builds large basins of stone that not a drop of the delicious water may be lost. He leads the stream through metallic pipes into a large receiver, that every pilgrim may refresh himself, and, praising the Almighty for his great favor, continue his journey.

At one of these restaurants, formed by nature, a corps of Frankish crusaders had taken their resting place, after the hard exertion of a skirmish, in which they had beaten and repelled a large body of Saracen warriors, who had attacked them unawares in the hot desert.

The leader of the corps sat at one of the springs washing the blood from a slight wound upon his brow. Beside him stood his page, who laid a dewy piece of cloth upon the wounded spot, then poured from a small bottle a few drops of cooling balm upon it and prepared to bind the wound of the knight.

"By the cross of my sword," muttered the wounded warrior, "I would now be the prey of a hyena if the lance of the quick Saracen had not rebounded from the stout leather-shield with which you at a very opportune moment protected my face. I owe you my life, my trusty Kuno; but what can I do for you in this country? I will surely not forget it, when we see again the friendly hills and dales of home."

"Do not mention this slight service, noble Count of Rabenfels," replied Kuno, the page. "Verily, I did not do more than my duty required of me. But I think we must be watchful that the Musselmen do not surprise us. A few of the enemy escaped; I saw them taking to flight upon their fleet horses over the sandy hills. Who knows, but they may be calling re-inforcements, and to take vengeance they will attack us before we have time to get our weapons ready. Therefore, noble lord, we will not leave the lances out of our hands, even while resting."

"You may be right," replied the lord of Rabenfels. "I honor your caution; the good success of it has been proven." Then he gave command that the crusaders should take their rest beneath the palms and satisfy their appetite on figs, dates and whatever the tropical climate produces; but the armour should not be cast aside, and every man should sleep with the coat of mail on his back, and the helmet, shield and weapons at his side.

Peter of Jenkendorf interpreted this command of the count to all the warriors, composed of many German clans, who had crowded under the banner of the noble Walter. And while Peter gave himself all possible authority he admonished them very severely, to be ready immediately, as soon as the least cloud of dust would show on the horizon.

Not half an hour had passed, and Peter became restless in his laziness, and the fresh water of the oasis would not suit his throat, that was accustomed to stronger liquids. He crept noiselessly into the centre of the crusaders, so that he could not be seen by the count, who always called him "brother frivolous," and took from his breast pocket a small flask, while a cunning smile played around his lips. "Comrades," he whispered, and cast a shy glance towards the place, where the count and the page were engaged in earnest conversation. "gaze and behold what I have captured. One of Mahomet's bloody warriors lost it while making his escape. I saw him, before the battle commenced, take a good dram from it, and by the double tiger upon my coat of arms he cut right and left with his weapon like an infuriated beast, and he landed one upon the forehead of our noble leader that would have ended badly, had not Kuno at that instant been on hand to break with his shield the terrible stroke, and kill the rascal upon the spot. Now, to come back to the original object of conversation, I mean this flask! I'll try its contents, I think what an infidel can drink and what will make him strong and eager for the battle, will not tear a German warrior asunder! Brethren, let us enjoy its contents. *Vivat* our home and what we have there to love and cherish. Drink, and believe in the great Peter! We will gain courage like true knights from Suabia's beautiful land."

With these words he put the flask to his lips, drank and gave the rest to his comrades. They sang German songs and drank till they could sing no more. Then their heads became heavy and sleepy. They turned their eyes to the right and turned them to the left, and were not able to say any thing to be understood.

"Oh, my poor brethren," stammered he of Jinkendorf, "we have got ourselves into a rather clumsy fix! I think that once I heard of it, that the Turks love a certain drink that will make any man, unaccustomed to it, drowsy and sleepy. This may have been that infernal stuff. To us Christians it seems, that it has not proved very palatable. And what will noble—ahem—lord say—when—ahem—he find us in—this interesting—condition?"

The terrible and all-powerful Peter shook once or twice his head; then he laid himself down into the high grass to cool off and the others all followed the example of their leader.

In the meantime the noble Walter of Rabenfels was lost in deep and interesting conversation which he carried on with his trusty squire; the topic was the sweet remembrances of the far-off home.

"About two years have passed," said the count, "since I left wife, child, sister, in fact, all I cherish dearly in this world. No intelligence, no reports from home have ever reached me, although I have often sent word by returning pilgrims; and often familiar faces arrived here; but none are able to give me any trustworthy account of the valleys of home. For the last two months we stray through this inhospitable desert, cut off from the main army of the Frankish knights, and troubles and hardships have more than doubly increased during these weeks."

"Do not give way to despondency, dear sir," replied the squire, "and think that we have undertaken to carry all these hardships and sufferings in honor of Him, who once, at not a very distant place from here suffered for our redemption and future salvation."

"If that confidence had not possession of my soul," replied the count, his eyes faithfully raised to the blue sky above, "despair would soon overpower me, my trusty Kuno. Indeed, it took no little manly struggle to leave a hearth where one has tasted so many sweet and peaceful enjoyments. To part from wife, child and sister, to follow an uncertain object that may please the Almighty, put which, under present circumstances, seems very doubtful. Hardly had we camped at Strassbourg when, after a night of confused dreams, one morning I discovered the loss of my blue scarf which Lucinda, at parting, had tied across my shoulders; her tears had fallen upon it, and I esteemed the token of sweet remembrance as a talisman. I

mourned its loss, for you know full well, my Kuno, how a true knight esteems such tokens of affection. We had, on the whole, a very bad voyage. Who dare deny it? At that period, also, the monk who appeared to be such an enthusiast for the holy cause, proved to have taken unasked leave of absence. It was a first-class piece of knavery. We traveled through France; we expected reinforcements there and got them. Encouraged by new hopes we soon reached Northern Italy. From the Gulf of Genoa we embarked, and landed, after a short voyage, safe and sound on the coast of Sicily, where we stayed over winter. But when, in the following spring we sailed from its shores and after we had gained the high sea, a terrible hurricane swept the larger part of the fleet into a watery grave; and only a few of the Franklin knights gained the coast of Africa. Exposed to the attacks of the Bedouins we strayed through the Wildernesses of Arabia petraea. And when, after a thousand of dangers, we had gained the main body of the army of the crusaders, at Hebron; when hardly the hope, like a bright star entered our hearts, that we could soon show ourselves to the King of Jerusalem, Baldwin II., to adore with him in the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, our Lord and Saviour, we were soon after a hot and terribly contested battle with the Saracens, again cut off from our brother warriors, and driven into the wilds of this desert, and, if God in his mercy does not interfere, a miserable death will soon be the lot of us all."

The count relapsed into silence. The page had not a word of comfort, and looked with a trembling eye down upon the ground. But more melancholy than before, Walter of Rabenfels recommenced:

"A bad presentiment, that misfortune has come upon my home, makes my soul tremble. An awful dream of last night is the cause of it. I saw Lucinda kneeling before my picture in the hall of my ancestors. 'Walter, I heard her call, 'dear Walter, send your spirit into the form of this painting or we are lost! Hell has opened its jaws to devour all, your home and those you hold most dear.' At that moment a terrible monster, half man and half dragon, smote its bloody wings, and the castle with all its beloved inhabitants was crushed to death. An awful cry awakened me from my dream, and the battle with the Saracens commenced, in which we proved so successful."

"Our victory may put to the blush and annihilate your ominous dream," consoled, with a smile, the page; but no pleasant smile was evoked from the dark features of the count.

At that moment there arose upon the far-off plains a dense cloud, that gained with every moment larger volumes, indicating its fast approach.

"What I have feared will happen," exclaimed the squire, and sprang from his seat to prepare the crusaders for the hostile attack.

In a moment the hero of Rabenfels sat solid and steady in his saddle, his lance in a ready, advanced position, and rode towards his men to give his commands.

But how shook his knightly frame when he saw how Peter of Jenkendorf and his comrades rubbed their sleepy eyes.

"By St. George," thundered the count, "What has happened? Has some evil spirit of the desert bewitched my people? Forward! to horse, I say, the Saracens approach!"

The crusaders soon gained their steeds, but the narcotic had had a very dulling effect upon their brains. Hardly had the count time to fire them on to valor, by recalling to their memory the many valiant deeds of former dates, when the Saracens had advanced within the throw of a lance to the oasis.

The voice of the hostile leader rang through the clouds of dust, threatening death and vengeance: "By Mahomet, the great prophet, those we seek are here! Down with the Frankish dogs! By the beard of the prophet, give them no quarters!"

This was the battle cry of the Turks. Then arose the war hymn. Being by far superior in numbers to the Christians, about ten Saracens would send their sharp arrows from their bows upon a crusader. At first the strong shields of the Franks withstood the flying weapons of the enemy; but in the long run they would not last. Many an arrow found a weak spot in the breastworks of the Germans and mortally wounded one, here and there would sink down from his steed. The Count noticed that the imminent danger would increase with every moment, if a desperate hand to hand conflict would not bring about a victorious termination of the battle.

"Brothers," he thundered with his heroic voice, and, if his vizer had been open, the flashing eyes would have appeared to send forth darts of fire, "will we stop here and let ourselves be slaughtered by the arrows of these infidels, while Germany's fiery blood courses yet in our veins? The knight only wins when he swings his heavy sword or lance in his strong and brawny hand! Remember your