

AFRA

A TYROLESE TALE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY By Otto Von Schabing

The pale January sun sent its slanting rays through the low windows of the great farmhouse at Wiedeck that stood looking down from the free heights of the Volderberg into the Unterinntal. The men and women servants of the place were gathered around the big oak table in the living-room, and were just ready to rise from their noonday meal.

At a side table the farmer sat by himself and meditatively nibbled at a crisp noodle. He was a big man, of some fifty odd years, whose sharp-cut features seemed darkened by sullen shadows. As his people arose for the customary grace after meals he too stood. The head servant led the prayer and the others responded. Just as the response chorused through the room, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," the door was opened, and a tall, lean man with a pedlar's pack on his back came in. He took off his broad-brimmed hat and joined in the prayers at once.

"God be with you all here!" said the newcomer, with that pleasant heartiness that tells of long acquaintance.

The servants answered each after his own manner and then went off to their several occupations, only the farmer himself remaining.

"Well, and how is everything up here?" the pedlar began, setting down his pack on a chair. "It is a goodly time since we have seen each other—half a year."

"H'm, something like that," said the farmer, while his eyes ran questioningly up and down the pack. "Dost bring something new, Hergottskraemer?" Where are you from to-day?"

"From the valley—from Hall. The road was very bad from Telfels up. Where is the good wife?" asked the trader.

"She has gone to Hall on a pilgrimage," the farmer grieved. "Woman fancies—let me see what there is in the pack," he added, hurriedly, as if to turn the conversation into other channels.

The pedlar undid the wrappings of unbleached linen which covered his pack. Then he spread a bright array of holy pictures on the table. Among them were a great number of pictures of the Sacred Heart, which were particularly popular since the Tyrol had been put under the special protection of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the year 1796, when the French invasion threatened by way of Italy. Nothing, however, seemed to please the farmer, who looked but hastily and turned up his nose.

"That will do," he said. "I do not want to see any more."

"Wait a little," said the trader. "I have something that might please thee. See!" And he held up at arm's length a beautiful group carved out of pearwood. It represented St. George, high on his horse above the dragon, into whose wide open mouth his spear was thrust. "Hast ever seen him made so well? I never did," the pedlar said, while his eyes shone with the light of appreciation.

The farmer rubbed his head on one side and looked at the carved gem which the trader held up before him. The lines in his deeply marked face grew deeper, and his expression became almost evil in its bitterness. He pressed his lips together and turned away. But the trader continued to praise the carving.

"Just look at the horse. Is it not as though it would come to life every moment? How can any one carve like that? Dost know what it's worth? Just guess."

The farmer shrugged his shoulders. "H'm, about three gulden."

"Then the trader laughed, as if the farmer's answer were the best joke possible.

"There, one can see what a farmer knows of art." And he placed the carving back on the table. "Let me tell thee, a great gentleman of Vienna has offered fifty golden gulden for it, but the carver said that he would not sell this carving for a hundred."

"H'm!" sneered the farmer. "He must be a fool."

The trader did not answer at once; then he spoke in a raised and solemn voice:

"He must be a fool, eh? So be it; dost thou know, he is thy own son?" The farmer stood as if struck with palsy, stirring neither hand nor foot, but his eyes glittered ominously. Then he folded his arms and said in a strange, hollow-sounding voice:

"So that's where the thing is from! And what does the whole farce mean?"

"Farce? There is no farce here, my good man," answered the trader. "Eight days ago I was with Franz, thy son. He gave me this carving to give to his father, because his father's name is George, too, he said, and he asked that his father should kindly take it. That's what he said—what Franz said. And he has sent thee something more, and I brought it right along. And before the farmer could recover from his astonishment the trader had gone out of the

door. When he came back in a few moments he was accompanied by a pale young woman, rather tall than short. In her clear-cut features there was a certain distinction. Her blue, inscrutable looking eyes were in striking yet most fascinating contrast to her deep black hair that waved around the high white forehead and fine temples. Her costume was that of the women of the Pusterthal at that time.

As she entered the room she greeted the farmer in a modest and quiet way, while her eyes were fixed, half questioningly, half shyly, upon the owner of Wiedeck. He on his part was so astonished at her appearance that he almost forgot the thanks for her greeting which custom demanded.

"Whom dost bring me here?" he asked the trader.

"Whom do I bring, farmer? Do not pretend like that. Hast not guessed who it is—Franz's wife?"

"Wh—wh—who? What?" stammered the farmer, and stared at the young woman's face.

She, however, stood his gaze without a sign of embarrassment, and then she took two or three steps towards him.

"Yes," she answered with the same calm with which she had greeted the master on entering. "I am Afra, thy daughter-in-law. A few days ago Sarnerquira here," she made a gesture towards the pedlar, "came to us and asked my husband had he a message for his father. Sarnerquira was going into the Unterinntal and around Hall to trade, and then it might happen that he would come up to the Wiedeck farm, too. Then all at once the thought came to me. 'Afra, go along with him and take Franz's finest piece of art as an offering to father.' Franz himself could not come because he is sick just now. And now, father-in-law, let me not go without peace and forgiveness for Franz and me."

Her voice shook, tears quivered on her lashes and her hands timidly clasped the hard right fist of the farmer. But he grabbed his hand away and turned his back on her.

"That has made a vain journey," he said, harshly. "With me there is no forgiving. It is thy fault that our son married against our will. Thou didst turn his head. Thou canst tell him that between him and me all is over. Go, and now see that thou findest the way he showed," pointing to the picture seller, "back again. I have finished."

"Oh, go along, farmer," said the image seller now, persuadingly. "Was it a crime that Franz married Afra against thy will? She is as good as gold. Not an ill word could be said about her. And even if her father has not a stocking full of gold put away like many a farmer, yet all the people respect him in the country around because of his art. Thou dost not need be ashamed of her for a daughter-in-law. See, just as I came into the room the people were praying, 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who—'"

"Stop talking stupid stuff. When I want to hear preaching I can go to church and hear the priest. Do you understand? Rather take this person and go thy way. 'Twill please me better."

The pedlar turned to go, but Afra, despite the farmer's brutal words, began once more:

"Father-in-law—"

"Father-in-law? Father-in-law nothing? Now, I am tired of this. Get out of my sight at once or my patience will be at an end!"

In the meantime the pedlar had packed up his things, leaving only the St. George group untouched. Now he nodded to Afra as a sign that he was ready to go. She hesitated a moment to see whether she should follow or wait and stay. Then she said in a trembling voice:

"Everything has its limits. Thou dost order me out. I go. But the time may come when thou shalt ask my forgiveness. God keep you!" And she turned quickly away.

"That's right, Afra. 'Twas a good dressing for the proud old fellow. I am glad."

The farmer himself came behind, his face red with anger. Then his gaze fell upon the carving of the St. George which the trader had left. With an oath he took it and raised his arm as if to dash the exquisite bit of work to pieces—anything to satisfy the bitter feeling of revenge that filled him. Then his hand sank back again. If it had been another saint perhaps even his sense of sacrifice might not have conquered his rage; but his own patron saint! He placed the group back on the table.

A little way Afra and Sarnerquira, as was the pedlar's name, went along together. Then they parted. The trader went up farther into the hills to sell his wares to the pious peasants, while Afra went down into the valley and towards Innsbruck. In that direction, behind the frozen, snow-covered, saw-like points of the Salstein and the Salzberg, was her home.

It was late in the day and the sun was hidden behind the gray and wintry clouds when the good wife of the Wiedeck farm returned from her pilgrimage near Hall, where she had been to lay the griefs of her mother heart before the Mother of God. Since her son had married the daughter of the poor sculptor down in the Puster-

thal peace had fled from Wiedeck. She herself had forgiven them long since, but the father seemed to get harder every day. The last six months had been beyond all endurance.

"Art here, Leni? I was beginning to think thou wast not coming back to Wiedeck." Thus the farmer greeted his good wife. There was a certain sneer in his voice, but the wife, a tall person, with a sharp-cut chin that showed a mind of her own, was not in the right mood for such a greeting.

"'Twould have been more sensible to have stayed away," she said, in a hurt tone, laying her rosary and prayer book on the window shelf and taking off her head-scarf. "I go on a pilgrimage to pray there may be an end of this trouble, and while I am gone thou dost spoil everything again with thy ungodly temper. I believe that it was Our Lady herself who sent Afra into our house to-day that there might be peace once more."

The farmer looked at her in utter astonishment, but did not speak.

"Yes, just look at me. I have heard all about thy senseless temper. Sarnerquira met me and told me everything."

"Then I do not have to tell thee again," the farmer said, dryly, and left the room to escape the gathering storm. But before he could close the door he heard his wife's plaint:

"If it goes on like this, I shall leave, too."

But he had heard this for weeks, once at least every day. So he was used to it. The next few days brought no betterment in the relationship of the couple—rather the contrary. The good wife could not banish from her mind the reflection of how well everything would have been if her husband had been kind to Afra, of whom, after all, she had heard nothing but what was good.

Then it happened one day that a religious from Hall, a Franciscan father, stopped at the Wiedeck farm. He had been up in the mountains visiting a sick relative.

"And is everything well with all here?" he asked of the good wife.

"Oh, no, father," she answered, with a sigh. "It is not well at all. Sit down, your reverence, or else the sleep will be carried out of the room. And she wiped the top of a chair with a corner of her apron, though there was not a speck of dust anywhere. In the meantime the farmer entered, too, and greeted the priest respectfully.

"Now, then, my good friend," began the priest, addressing the wife, "what is the trouble? According to your pleasant face you are most healthy."

The good wife stroked her shoulder cloth nervously.

"Ah, your reverence, the trouble with us is altogether different. There is r, living her since Franz—" Then her voice broke.

"Did Franz die?" as Father Cyprian, kindly.

"Die!" said the farmer now. "No; he did not die. But as good as that. He married, and he married against our wishes. And that is trouble enough."

"So, so," said Father Cyprian then, slowly. "I have not heard anything of this at all. How did it happen, anyway?"

"H'm," began the farmer, "it is soon told. You must know, your reverence, that even as a boy Franz had a turn for whittling and carving figures. It was wonderful how natural he could make everything. And, as it often happens hereabouts, a strange gentleman came up here in the summer time and went by our house one day. Of course, Franz was sitting out on the bench and whittling. The gentleman stopped and looked at the boy, and then he said to me: 'There's something in that lad. He will be an artist some day, if he is sent to study.' But I did not think much about it, for these city gentlemen can talk a lot in a lifetime without saying much. But the boy begged and teased after that to be sent away. I for my part did not want to help him along in such nonsense, but my wife began to beg and plague, too, and at last, like a good-natured stupid, I gave way, as I always do, and sent Franz to St. Lorenzen to learn with old Nuwal. He was recommended to me as a very good sculptor and teacher. Franz was sixteen years old then. He did learn something worth while—that is true. But now comes the main part. After three years the boy came home. It wasn't long before I saw that something was wrong. And then, to make the story short, I found that he had just lost his head about Afra, the old sculptor's daughter. He wanted to marry her, and he wouldn't listen to even a word about any one else. There, what do you think, your reverence? All my talk and all my warnings were wasted on that boy. It was just as if he were bewitched. After awhile the whole thing seemed too silly for me, and then I said to him: 'Franz, either thou dost obey me, or thou canst take bag and baggage and go out of my house.' And what do you think that stubborn-headed lad did? He went away into Italy, down to Rome, until he was of age. And then, a half year ago, he came back and married that girl. Now he is living in Lorenzen as a carver and sculptor, and in to my house he cannot come."

"H'm," said Father Cyprian, and nodded his head reflectively. "This is indeed a serious story, but see now, farmer: Franz is, after all, your own flesh and blood, and even if he was wanting in obedience to his parents, you must not close the door of your house against him. That is un-Christian."

"That's what I am always saying,"

the good wife hastened to put in. "And, then, what is there about his wife that you do not like her? Is she a good woman? If she is, I do not know why you should not acknowledge her as your daughter-in-law."

"Dost hear, George? Do I not always say so?" the good wife said to her husband. "Your reverence, now listen to me."

And then she began and told her side of the story. For a long time she, too, was angry with the lad, but now she had forgiven him and his wife. Then she began to tell of Afra's visit and the pedlar's praises of the young woman. Then she suddenly left the room, coming back in a few moments with an article that she showed the guest, with the words:

"See, your reverence! This is something that Franz carved! What do you think of it?"

Father Cyprian arose from his chair and walked to the window so as to have a better light on the carved St. George group. For a few moments he was silent, and then his features lit up with enthusiasm. Then he suddenly called out: "Wonderful! Beautiful! Why, this is a work of art! Do you know what, farmer? Your son is an artist whom our Lord has blessed with a great gift, and you may well be proud of him. 'Twould be a sin and a shame to hold him in scorn any longer."

"That's what I always say," the good wife put in again, and then she began to sob with mingled grief and delight.

The farmer stood as if turned to stone and said never a word, but just the same his eyes brightened as if with a secret pleasure at the praise which Father Cyprian gave his son's work.

"I'll tell you what," Father Cyprian said then, taking up the group once more. "Let us take this carving along with me and show it to our father superior. We need several large statues for our church, and Franz should make them for us. I will get him the commission. But, farmer, you must give up these bickerings. Your son holds out his hand asking forgiveness and peace. And, then, it is your duty to put aside hate and bitterness. Think of what our Lord Jesus Christ said to Peter when asked how many times we should forgive our fellow men: 'Seventy times seven.' Think also of the parable of the master and the servants, and how the master treated the servant who was hard towards his fellow-servant who was in his debt. And now God keep you all! He will find the way to set everything right."

Then, slipping the carving under his cloak, the son of St. Francis went on his way.

It was towards the end of March. A wondrous light and life flooded the young earth, for spring had assumed her sway over the land of Tyrol, and the warm breath of the south wind had melted the snow and ice from the mountain sides and set free the streams in the valleys. Fresh, soft greens and many-hued blooms filled the eye with delight and the nostrils with sweetness.

In front of a little brown-shingled house in St. Lorenzen, in the lovely Pusterthal, a finch sang its gay song hidden in the white and pink fragrance of a blossom-covered apple tree. His song along with the golden sunshine streamed into the open window of a modest little room. Here among finished and half-finished figures and pieces of carving and new designs a young man, chisel in hand, was working away at a block, bringing out more and more distinctly at every stroke the outlines of a human figure. The young artist was Franz Trauner, the son of the owner of the Wiedeck farm. His young wife Afra sat near him, her fine face a little paler than usual. Lines of sorrow and sadness were about her mouth. Her hands, though resting idly in her lap, held some knitting. She sighed deeply and her husband paused in his work and turned to her.

"Console thyself, Afra," he said, and gently stroked her soft hair. "Death must come to us all, and we can do nothing but accept it."

"That is true; but father might perhaps have lived longer if—" She stopped, overcome by her emotions, and Franz understood what she had meant to say.

Eight days before the old artist Nuwal, her father and Franz's teacher, had died. He had not been well for a long time, but after the return of his daughter from the Wiedeck farm he had failed rapidly. Secret grief and worry about the possible future of his old child filled his heart and sapped the little strength left him. A single gleam of pleasure had come through the gloom of the small remaining margin of his life in the honorable and flattering commission given to his pupil and son-in-law by the Franciscans of Hall for the statues of the Twelve Apostles.

And Franz's work-loving hand was even now busy at the execution of the commission. The first figure of the chief of the Apostles was growing out of the block under his touch. He was just about to begin his interrupted work again when the face of Sarnerquira, the picture pedlar, whose house was right near the Nuwal house, appeared at the window.

"Trauner," he said, "hast heard the news?"

"What news?" asked Franz, raising his curly head.

"To-morrow the militia of Lorenzen are going out against the enemy, who is before Schabs even now. Brotherheart, let the French take care! My rifle is in order already."

With that he vanished.

Franz chiselled away calmly, talking with his wife about the course of events of the while. Since the 24th of March of that year a mighty gathering of fighters had filled the valleys of the Tyrol. The militia was preparing to defend the land against the French troops threatening from the south. From the hills the signal fires flamed, and in the villages the alarm bells were calling the able-bodied men to the defense.

It was on the 2nd of April, on the so-called Black, or Passion, Sunday, Near Sprignes, where the vine-covered lower heights rise to the points of Eisak, the yeomanry attacked the French under General Joubert. From 9 o'clock in the morning until sunset the bloody and unequal fray raged around the houses, over the meads and in the woods of Sprignes. The rifles, scythes and pitchforks of the Tyrolean peasants made sad havoc among the enemy, though the French greatly outnumbered the natives. But the defenders, too, suffered many and terrible losses. Here at one side lay a loyal hero, the Tyrolean Winkelreid, the sycemacher Reinisch of Volders. He was pierced with eleven bayonet wounds, and around him lay fifteen French soldiers whom the great bludgeon before he felt himself. Not a hundred feet away lay another brave man, his breast pierced with French lead. Many a one knew and loved him in the Tyrolean land. Over at the forest edge the white and green flag of the company with which he had gone forth merrily to fight the day before was gaily fluttering in the wind. But he lay there, cold and dead the picture and image pedlar, Sarnerquira.

Franz Trauner could not bring himself to stay away when the fight for home and country was being waged near him. Moreover, his hand was as quick with the rifle as with the chisel. To be sure, Afra was mortally frightened when he spoke of going. But all her entreaties to induce him to change his mind were in vain. Then she said to him: "Well, then, if you go, I go, too." And the brave young woman kept her word. As the fight progressed her courage and calmness seemed to increase rather than to leave her. For hours she had stood beside her husband behind a protecting boulder loading his two rifles with practised hand, he firing one while she loaded the other. Many a shot came hissing over the two or rebounded from the rocks as a little message from the enemy, but so far neither had suffered any harm.

Franz had just taken the loaded rifle out of Afra's hand. His sharp eyes were trying to pierce the thick powder smoke that hung over the enemy's ditches. In the meantime Afra was preparing the second rifle. She poured powder out of the horn into the barrel, put the ball and wad on top, and rammed the whole down with the rod. While thus occupied her chance gaze ran along the edge of the forest. Her features stiffened in sudden fright, her eyes opened wide and her whole body shook.

"Franz, Franz!" she called, shrilly. "Look there! Look, look! Come quick! Yes, yes, it is he!"

And even while she was saying these words she, scorning the danger, ran out into the open field. There stood a Tyrolean peasant in the costume of the Unterinntal. The poor man was hard put against three French grenadiers, who were making for him with their bayonets. To be sure, he disabled and knocked down one with a thundering blow of his rifle butt. For that, however, the other two knocked him down. With the strength of despair he grabbed the bayonet that one of them set against his breast and tried to keep the murderous steel out of his body. But the other's bayonet was ready to do the work alone and even then the Tyrolean felt its point piercing his heavy coat. Life seemed but a matter of moments, when a shot rang out right at hand, and one of the soldiers fell.

The death of his two companions maddened the remaining grenadier. His flaming eye sought the new opponent, and beheld a woman threatening him with the butt of her raised rifle. Like lightning his sabre flashed out of its sheath, and, with an oath at the "canaille," he sprang towards her and made a lunge at her side with his weapon. Just as he struck her another shot rang out, and he, too, fell. For Franz had paid home swiftly the injury to his brave wife.

All these things had happened so quickly that Franz hardly knew what it all meant. Only now did his glance fall upon the Unterinntal, who was slowly gathering himself from the ground and getting up. His face was black with powder and perspiration. Nevertheless Franz recognized him with a sort of glad fear:

"Heavens, father, art hurt?"

"Yes, that I am; but 'tis a trifle. First let us look after Afra. Me later."

Franz examined his wife's wound. Fortunately it was not severe. Father and son raised the unconscious young

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