

A STORY OF RETRIBUTION.



FOR many years a small hut stood in an opening in the heart of the Black Forest. There was not another dwelling within twenty miles. The hut was solitary, as the forest was a solitude. An old couple of singularly simple habits had lived here for forty years. A half acre of forest land cleared away was their garden; and twice a year they trudged on foot to the nearest market and sold what they could spare from their own necessities. Aside from this journey they never went a mile from the cottage door.

It needed but one look at the old man's mumbling lips and bleared eyes, or to see the childish way he followed his wife about and did her bidding, to know that he was a foolish, harmless fellow, half idiot, half paralytic. As for the woman, her face showed more intelligence, but was even less pleasing. Her small blue eyes were crafty and relentless, and her parchment skin had sunk into forbidding lines about her mouth. However, she kept herself, as well as the foolish old man, and the cottage spotlessly clean. If she had been expecting the arrival of some dear friend every moment, she could not have been more scrupulous about sweeping the clay floor of her hut, or more careful to keep the husk mattress in the sleeping-loft fresh and dry.

She and her husband worked side by side in the garden, seldom exchanging a word, in stolid peasant fashion, except when she called out, "Here, Ludwig!"—wanting him to do something for her. The old man followed her, indoors and out, his trembling lower lip hanging down, his vacant eyes watching her motions and trying to imitate them, like a small child.

Silently they worked together during the day, and silently they sat and smoked together on the bench in front of the house in the evening.

As it began to grow dusk, the old woman (whom her husband called Hunta), would take the pipe from her blackened

teeth, and hobble down to the road that rose and fell and crept away into the darkness of the forest. As long as the light lasted, she would stand, looking intently down the road, shading her eyes with both gnarled and crooked hands; even after night had come she waited, listening for many moments longer. Was she expecting guests?

Twelve years before, a man had stopped at night-fall and asked for a place to rest. He was made welcome, as the family depended largely for their living upon the occasional travellers through the forest. The man looked not only tired but sick, ate the merest mouthful of supper, and went up early to the clean little loft, with his bed of sweet-smelling husks. He did not come down the next morning. Toward noon Hunta went up to waken him, thinking he would want to continue his journey, and found him lying dead, with a stain of blood on the pillow under his cheek. There seemed to be nothing for them to do but to bury him. It often happened that for six weeks together no one came near the hut, and Hunta's brain was so low in expedients that it never occurred to her to go twenty miles, to the nearest town for assistance, or for a purpose other than to sell cabbage and potatoes twice a year. Otherwise someone might have come out to help give the stranger a decent burial, and see if there was any clue to his identity.

But to Hunta, a dead man was a dead man: there was nothing to do but to bury him. So with only Ludwig, like a terrified child, to help her, she tried to make preparations as she had seen once or twice in her life. Under the stranger's vest, she found a heavy leather belt. She looked it over, felt of it, and at last cut it open. Handful after handful of gold coins slid out on the floor. Ludwig sprang to snatch some of the shining objects, but Hunta held his hands back.

"No, Ludwig, no!" she cried out sharply, "they are for Erfurt: we'll keep them for him, there's a good Ludwig." Trembling with eagerness, she gathered the gold into her apron, and Ludwig never