

"Ha, ha!" said the bailiff, laughing sneeringly in the peasant's face. "A few days ago you had little desire to celebrate a wedding, so you shall not do so to-day. Do you understand me? Take off your Sunday clothes and then go to your work!"

A murmur of displeasure arose from the whole circle. Heinrich was about to give an angry reply to the bailiff; but his father put his hand on his arm and restrained him.

"Don't, Heinrich!" he said, with great difficulty mastering his own temper. "Be calm, friends! The Count has given his consent to my son's marriage, he knows that the wedding is to be to-day, therefore he cannot desire that you should work for him now."

"He cannot, indeed?" exclaimed the bailiff. "Will you, perhaps, hinder him then? Ha, ha! You are serfs, and nothing more! You must obey when the Count commands, or you will taste the whip soon enough!"

Still louder became the expressions of discontent among the peasants at this harshness, and that the happiness of the day should be disturbed in such a bitter manner.

Schober tightly compressed his lips. He wished to master himself, but he had not strength to do so.

"I know that we are serfs, and that we must obey!" he exclaimed. "Friends we must submit. A few days ago the bailiff swore vengeance against me, because I would not give my daughter to his son for his wife—this is his revenge. We will go to work afterwards! We will obey his orders as soon as the ceremony is concluded."

The bailiff's face was red with fury.

"To church you shall not go!" he cried. "The wedding shall not take place, the Count has given his orders!"

Heinrich sprang forward aghast.

"The marriage not take, how?" he exclaimed. "The Count has given me his consent, and no one shall hinder me from going to church—you least of all!"

"Silence, you rascal!" the bailiff interrupted him.

"Not an inch from this spot shall you move! You will not be united to the girl—no, never! Go to work every one of you!"

The anger of the peasants now broke forth loudly and openly. Threats were uttered, the young men wanted to attack the bailiff. Schober had regained his composure. He kept the lads back.

"No violence," he exclaimed. "I will hasten to the Castle to the Count, he cannot be so cruel!"

He was about to hurry off when the Count himself stood in the courtyard. His eye looked dark and threatening. Heinrich alone stepped forward boldly; his happiness was at stake.

"He has stopped the wedding procession from going to church," he said in a trembling voice; "he wishes to drive us to work!"

"I have commanded him to do so, and you have to obey," replied the Count.

"Gracious lord and master, you gave me your consent to the marriage," cried Heinrich, full of despair, scarcely master of himself; "you dare not break your word, merely because the bailiff hates my father, and wishes to revenge himself on us!"

"Impudent fellow!" exclaimed the Count. "Serf, I will show you what I dare, and can do!"

He raised the riding whip which he had in his hand over Heinrich's head, and was about to strike him. A shriek of horror rose from the bystanders. Schober stepped hastily forward up to the Count, and, with his strong hand, held back his arm.

"Not so, my Lord Count!" he exclaimed, in a stern voice; "my son is right: you dare not break your word! You must keep your promise!"

His anxiety about son's happiness had made him go to such a length as this. In a violent passion, the Count turned upon him, and pushed him back.

"Bailiff!" he exclaimed, "bind the impertinent scoundrel! The dog! he has dared to lay hands upon me! Bind him, lead him up to the Castle—throw him into prison, he shall atone for it, bitterly atone for it!"

With a look of cruel malice the bailiff, assisted by his son, hastened up to the peasant and seized him.

Schober offered no resistance. Despair took possession of Heinrich when he saw his father captured.

"Father! father!" he exclaimed; he wished to hasten up to him, to free him.

"Back!" exclaimed the Count, and a heavy blow from the riding whip struck the young man in the face. "Think about your own safety, and take care that I do not shut you up, too!"

Heinrich reeled backwards. His bride, his mother and sister, screamed aloud, but not one of the peasants had the courage to support him. They had been brought up in bondage, and there were few among them who had not already suffered a similar chastisement from their hard master. Their courage had long since been broken.

Schober covered his face with both his hands when he saw his son so savagely misused. A wild, fierce thought, indeed, passed through his mind; if he had had a weapon in his hand he would, perhaps, by the Count's death have revenged the insult which his son had received—but he was weak and powerless.

"Help my father! help him!" cried Heinrich to the bystanders; he was himself scarcely able to stand on his feet, and not a hand dared to move for the poor man's deliverance.

With a malicious, triumphant smile, the Count remarked their timidity.

"Yes, help him!" he replied, mocking them; "venture only to move, and I will whip you to death like dogs who will not obey me! like dogs who have bitten their master! Help him! ha, ha! I will put those words to the rascal's account. Serfs you are! You shall tremble when you see me, when you hear my voice. You shall not dare to look at me. You hold your heads too high. The whip shall bend your backs for you! To work with you! be off!"

Not one of the men ventured to reply by a single word. Hastily they left the house and the court-yard.

Schober was led to the Castle. The Count followed him. Silence now reigned in the peasant's farm, where a short time before there had been so much life and merriment. With one blow the universal happiness had been destroyed. The wreaths and decorations still hung, as if in mockery, on the walls and doors.

Still dressed in his wedding suit, Heinrich sat in his father's room, staring vacantly on the ground. He did not hear the loud lamentations and the sobs of his bride, his mother, and sister; he did not even see them. His thoughts had followed his unfortunate father to the Castle. He saw how the bailiff thrust him into a dark, damp dungeon; he heard, in imagination, the master's loud, mocking laugh, as he shut the door behind him. He knew the cruel disposition of the Count, and he could not hope for mercy. And should he let his father suffer for his sake? And what punishment would the Count inflict on him? Would he have him whipped, as he had had so many other victims up in the Castle-yard lashed till their cries of agony sounded down into the village, and with such barbarity that the traces of the whip were after the lapse of years, still visible on the backs of the wretched men?

Could his father be destined to such a fate? He did not think of himself, of his own completely destroyed happiness, he thought not even of his bride.