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

(From the Catholic Telegraph) CHAPTER IX.—A STRANGE STORY.

"There lived, once, at an emperor's court an old and scientific man; he was a master of the noble medicinal art and was also well versed in secret and occult sciences. This raised him to a high place in the king's esteem, and the latter would never do anything without his wise counsel. This man had an only daughter. He loved his child with an undivided heart, as she was the very image of his wife, whom a cruel death had soon and suddenly taken away after the birth of the child. The father educated his daughter as only a good parent is capable of doing; he even taught her to study and learn the curative powers of nature, to gather herbs, and to offer the sick and afflicted strengthening draughts and cordials. This noble friend of humanity thought this knowledge could hardly harm the child, and that in times of need many a troubled fellow-creature might be benefited by it. The daughter grew in soul and body, and was lovely to behold. The rose of her eighteenth year began to unfold, and the father felt a joy at heart over this well-grown flower. But her tender beauty could hardly remain unnoticed at an emperor's court; many a young and gallant knight most ardently endeavored to gain her hand. The emperor himself advocated the claims of a young knight who had been raised within the walls of his castle. 'Will you marry him?' the father asked his inexperienced child, and she consented. The wedding was held in grand style; it was a feast as there had never been in the whole empire. Poor, deceived girl, when you thought to rush into the arms of happiness and bliss on that day, your peace and sweet rest were carried to the grave. The knight took his young wife to his home on the Danube. Happily and joyously passed the honeymoon; for the knight preferred to stay at home to relate many a beautiful and gallant story while his lady sat at the spinning-wheel, the golden thread passing merrily through her fingers. But now the passion of a hunter's wild life took the husband from her side. At first he would return home with the fading evening rays; but at last he clung day and night to this wild passion. The love for his wife soon died from his heart; drinking and gambling with his reckless associates soon made him a stranger to his home and a devotee to all sensual pleasures and crimes. Oh, how the forsaken young wife prayed, how cried! How many a fervent prayer, intermingled with scalding tears, arose to God for the return of her wayward husband. Yes, had it been possible, tears of blood had passed over her pale and haggard cheeks. All in vain! The wife was a thorn in the eye of the knight, who had no taste for conjugal happiness, and in whose veins coursed the poison inhaled from the corrupt morals of the imperial court.

In the meantime the young wife had become mother of a beautiful girl; a new joy entered her bosom, for she now harbored the positive belief that the former days of bliss and happiness would return once more. But the poor creature was deceived. The knight gazed with ill-concealed temper upon his young wife and child. He had expected a son, whom

he intended to educate as a trusty companion of his revels, far from the quiet felicity of his hearthstone. His spouse became hateful to him, like a poisonous serpent, and with a look of hellish disgust he stared upon his own child. Three years this miserable life lasted, which seemed to the unconsolable wife like a terrible eternity, and only a fond look upon the growing child would momentarily break the black clouds. The awful pain and misfortune of the knight's lady had reached their height, when one afternoon she took a walk upon the beautiful banks of the Danube; while Johannah, the child, played with the flowers among the grass. The poor woman seated herself in the shade of an elm tree and gave free vent to her long concealed tears.

In the meantime a man, well disguised, had approached the unsuspecting group. Too late the mother, lost in melancholy thoughts, perceived the terrible man. He quickly gathered the crying wail in his arms, and mocking the wailing cry of the terrified mother, he darted away with his booty and was soon lost to sight among the thick foliage of the bushes. The lady sank to the ground in an agony of despair, and so remained for over an hour, showing no spark of life. When at last she returned to consciousness of the stern reality, without help and without consolation, she stretched her trembling hands towards the heavens in mute despair.

When the last rays of the setting sun brought the approaching evening, the knight passed close by her; he had returned after a three days' hunt.

"What has happened?" he thundered with vehemence, "that you remain here so late, and where is your daughter, faithless mother?"

Trembling and in broken words the unfortunate woman endeavored to relate the terrible accident that had happened.

Then the eyes of the knight darkened like a black cloud, and drawing a wet garment from his coat, he clenched his fist and exclaimed with the fury of a demon:

"Miserable wretch, know you this garment? I have dragged it from the waves of the Danube. The child has found her grave in the stream; you left her playing carelessly near the bank and have thereby become her murderer. Is this the mother's faith you have bragged of so continually? Show me the care for your darling, that would leave you no rest by day and rob you of your sleep by night.—Now the mask has fallen from your face, deceitful hypocrite! Ha, but I will avenge the death of my child most terribly! I swear it by the face of the moon rising yonder! If three days pass and the child is not returned to me, I will throw you out of my house, whose disgrace you have been from the first moment you entered it." Such were the words of the furious knight, but he would not listen to his poor afflicted wife. She endeavored to relate; she solemnly declared her innocence, she called the bright evening star to witness, that every word she uttered in her defense was true, but the cruel knight pushed her unmercifully from his side. He ordered a companion to gag and to drag her along the rough road to the castle, where he kept her imprisoned on bread and water till the three days had passed. And on the fourth day, when midnight had hardly passed, the wild knight stood before his wife, who had no tears left in her vacant eye, staring at his clouded face, and ready to receive the terrible judgment.

"Woman," thundered the scoundrel, "live you still? Has the loss of your angel child touched no painful chord in your heart? The little innocent is gone! No one has been able to discover a trace of her! Well, atone now for your crime! Go to Spain, or wherever you will, to pay your awful debt, only do not show yourself before my eyes again. Beg at the door of poor shepherds for your daily bread; or, perhaps, it would be better if you would follow your daughter into the depths of the Danube, and give in you black eternity my best wishes to your father, who, as reports say, has gone there a few months since."

Thus the knight cast off his wife, who clung to his knees with the strength of despair, begging him by the mercy of an Almighty God, to allow her one little, secluded chamber in his house to pass there the few remaining days of her life. But all in vain. A masked servant tore the unfortunate wife from the feet of her husband and conducted her, before morning dawned, far from home across the Danube, till she sank down in a swoon beneath an old oak in a wild and strange forest. The servant left the poor creature in her desolate position and retraced his steps.

Here the old woman of Oakdale took a kerchief from her pocket and dried a few tears from her eyes that were witnesses of the great interest she took in her own story. Countess Lucinda was equally affected by this strange recital and it took some time before she could utter a word. A deep paleness had settled

upon her cheeks and with trembling lips she said:

"Strange woman! You promised to relate a narrative that would brighten my depressed mind; now there has escaped from you a story which fills my innermost heart with an icy tremor. Why have you entertained me thus? But still I do not know how it is; now that I have heard so much, I would like to know all, be it ever so terrible. Tell me quickly the fate of the cast-off wife, and then I would like to know the names of the persons and the scene of the occurrence."

The witch seemed surprised at Lucinda's question, and she looked with a strange gaze into the eyes of the countess, and reached with trembling fingers for her hand. Great drops of perspiration pealed upon her brown forehead and suddenly the words broke from her lips:

"Lady, do you ask these questions in good earnest, and do compassion and pity prompt you?"

But at this moment the conflict in her heart appeared to have ceased. She raised her eyes with a mien of deepest resignation towards the beautiful sky, crossed her hands upon her breast and said at last:

"You shall know when I return. See, I have nearly remained too long at Rabenfels, and, oh, my God! the poor farmer of Nettershausen languishes for another draught from my hand; and in fact, that damp autumn breeze does not agree with me; there, near the wall towards the valley the sun draws in the vapors. That is a very bad omen. Yes, verily, in the dark depths of the far west streaks of lightning cross the heavens. Woe, if at this late season of the year a storm should arrive. In truth it is high time for me to leave you, noble lady. Farewell! I think not of what I have related to you in this hour. During the long and lonely nights it might haunt your slumbers in the form of bad dreams.—Farewell!"

The old woman bowed to the countess and walked away. But suddenly she turned and came back once more. Lucinda became curious to know what she could wish.

Trude drew from her pocket a large key, and said:

"At the time when I visited the sick squire, Kuno, at Rabenfels, I found this key in the courtyard. It was nearly consumed by rust, and did not seem worthy of my notice. But it was as if a voice from above told me that it might be of use in the future. I picked it up and had it repaired by one of the smiths of Nettershausen, so that it might pass for a new one. Take it, gentle lady, and preserve it. A higher Providence has pointed it out to me, and who knows that it may not, in some dark hour of your life, be a means to save you from a great danger. But behold those black and threatening clouds in the western heavens! They are the forerunners of an awful storm. May merciful heaven keep us from all harm!"

Then she descended the hill, on which the castle stood, with a rapidity which astonished the countess. The latter pocketed the key, which she had received under such mysterious circumstances, and in a thoughtful mood retraced her steps towards the castle.

CHAPTER X.—THE STORM OF RABENFELS.

At the foot of the hill Trude met Gassler, who was returning home from the chase. He had been imbibing very freely at a neighbouring inn, and had heated his brain to such an extent, that he sought in furious riding to cool his fevered blood. Urged on by him his proud charger ascended the hill at a tremendous pace, and nearly trampled under his hoofs the old woman who was descending. Just in the nick of time the knight perceived her, and jerking aside his horse, he exclaimed, angrily:

"You here again, old hag? Must your evil eye haunt me constantly? By my knightly honor, your presence at Rabenfels is sure to bring misfortune and accidents upon the castle."

But Gertrude retorted composedly: "Softly, Sir Gassler, do not burden the weak shoulders of the old woman with an evil of which she is innocent. It seems to me that the evil destiny of Rabenfels is even now riding toward its walls."

The cavalier overheard her last utterance, and would have ridden his beast over the defenceless woman. But with an alacrity, unusual in her, she took a narrow and steep side-path, upon which the rider could not follow.

His curses rang out upon the air, until he reached the courtyard.

There all was silent and deserted. The wind, the monitor of a coming storm, was sighing with a noise, like the wailings of a lost soul, among the old walls. The Castellan, who had accompanied Gassler, led the exhausted horses to the stables, then he raised the drawbridge and closed the heavy castle door with the iron cross-bolt, meanwhile anxiously scanning the heavens. A cloud of inky blackness hung like a black veil over the castle. Ever anon the blackness of the cloud was relieved by a sheet

of lightning, which darted out from the blackest spot, while in the distance incessant peals of thunder were heard gradually approaching in volume and intensity. The Castellan crossed himself, and muttering many a silent prayer, he repaired to his own room, haunted by gloomy and fearful thoughts.

Sigismund Gassler stood at the great portal, which led to the apartments of the ladies of the castle. The continual rumbling of the approaching thunder storm sounded to him like a warning voice from on high, and his uneasy conscience made him exaggerate the danger; his disordered mind, heated, moreover, by strong libations, conjured up before his mental eye the images of his wronged wife, and his innocent child—their pleadings resounded in his ears—their hands were outstretched towards him, and he was already giving way to better feelings; for, he remembered, that Gassler, deprived as he was, could not be altogether impervious to the "still small voice" within his breast.

Suddenly a bent form rose up before him. He started back in affright, and recognized his companion in crime, the Fish Veit of Costnitz.

"What," cried the astounded knight, "are you already returned from your sacred pilgrimage?"

"Aye," returned the false monk, "and I've accomplished that which will unquestionably crown our projects with success. Under cover of my false cowl, which I have now thrown off, all progressed swimmingly; I accompanied Count Walter nearly to Strassburg. On our way hither we met another large horde of crusaders, who welcomed the noble count most cordially. His resolve to continue his journey to the Holy Land was thereby rendered still more firm, and my task was done. The next night, when the weary count was fast asleep in his tent, I abstracted this scarf from his person, and took French leave. Here is the scarf; you may have occasion to use it; you understand me. But now I'll restore my weary limbs by a good bottle of old Rhenish wine. By my troth, Sir knight, I've used my peddles for the last week most diligently, and am quite exhausted. But a good glass of the juice of the grape and a sound sleep will make Richard himself again. So, good night; to-morrow we will settle our accounts."

The knight received the scarf from the hand of his accomplice, who repaired to the warden's room, where he was received and cordially entertained by the hospitable servants. Soon after the magician, Bart. Smoke, approached the knight, and with a satanical smile said:

"Is it you, really; but what ails you, Sir Knight? You do not appear like a young and hopeful bridegroom. I should rather be tempted, when looking at your face now, to transport you to the hospital. Your features are pale and haggard. Come and arrange your toilet, as befits a young and handsome suitor. I will show you the goal of your wishes. Now or never, Sir Gassler! Lady Lucinda has just entered the picture gallery, and is standing, lost in thought, before the count's picture.—Come, do not delay one moment. Every second is precious. Play your part well, as I have taught it to you, and your wishes are fulfilled."

"Do you tell me so," returned the knight moodily; and as he proceeded to follow the magician, he exclaimed with vehemence: "I follow you. My wife she shall be at all hazards!"

They proceeded through the arched entrance, their footsteps causing a weird echo. Suddenly they were saluted by the chanting of a sweet cradle song, which proceeded from one of the apartments. It was Eliza, who, in Lucinda's absence, acted the part of mother towards Count Walter's young heir.

"Who would not fall asleep under the influence of such a ditty," sneered Gassler's companion, and drew the knight, in whom the sweet voice and tender words had touched a tender chord, away.

They reached the gallery, through whose half open door they distinguished the pictures of Walter's ancestors, and for a moment they were awed by the scene. But soon they shook off the spell, and the magician, whispering a "Good spell" to the knight closed the door behind him, leaving the plotting knight in the room with the countess. She was standing before the life-size picture of her absent lord, and contemplating the features with mingled feelings of pride and sadness. Her back was turned to the door; so she was ignorant of the presence of the intruder. Silent tears coursed down her cheeks, and the anguish of her heart broke out at last in the following words:

"Walter, most beloved of husbands, why have you left the wife of your heart, to wander to a strange land, from which you will, perhaps, never return? Oft it seems to me as if a horrid dream enthralled my senses; and on awakening, I think you are there to clasp me to your faithful heart, and dispel all my visions

of sorrow and misfortune! But no; the gnawing, bitter pain of separation is a fearful reality, and awful forebodings of your death often cross my mind. The home which so long was my earthly heaven, is now become a purgatory, in which the sweet face of my darling Otto and my gentle Eliza, your dear sister, are the only redeeming features. Oh, that you were here to console and reassure my drooping spirits."

Her fast falling tears choked her utterance, while her gaze rested with inexpressible tenderness upon the picture of her husband. Suddenly she started; it was as if the voice of the child was calling from the adjoining room.

She took the lamp and advanced towards the door. What was her horror and affright when she beheld Sigismund Gassler standing at the entrance.

She was startled, but soon recovered herself, and with a calm dignity she walked past the knight. But Gassler, with a ceremonious bow, stepped before her, and said:

"I hope I have not interrupted you in any pleasant occupation, lady. Pray stay, and listen to what I will tell you."

"Another time, protector of Rabenfels, another time, when a more proper opportunity offers," returned the countess, pale and trembling, and placed her hand on door. It was locked. Faint with terror and just indignation she tottered back to the centre of the room, where Gassler followed her doggedly.

"You needs must stay, gentle lady," whispered the hypocrite, gradually dropping his mask; "I have a piece of news for you, which you can best hear before the picture of your lord. Count Walter, of Rabenfels, is no more in the land of the living. In a narrow causeway his charger stumbled and fell, burying the rider under his weight. With a broken spine the count was taken up and borne to the hospital at Strassburg, where he soon breathed his last."

"You lie, Gassler," interrupted Lucinda, nearly crazed with anxiety. "Our merciful Father can not have allotted me such a terrible vision!"

Without deigning to answer her, Gassler drew from his doublet the scarf which he had just received from his accomplice, and handed it to the countess with these words:

"Do you recognize this scarf? Veit Jurgen, of Costnitz, who has just arrived from Strassburg, brings it for you, with the last regards of Sir Walter to his wife, child and sister, and with a request to your humble servant to care for his beloved ones."

"Heavenly Father!" ejaculated Lucinda, and sank swooning to the floor, before her husband's picture.

Gassler stood contemplating the stricken woman, and the sight of the misery which he saw pictured in the pale and suffering face before him, and as the prime cause of which he must accuse himself, made him waver in his evil resolution. The angel of good, and the evil spirit were struggling within him for the mastery. But the idea of beholding himself lord of Rabenfels and its immense possessions, and the husband of the most beautiful and accomplished lady in the land, at last decided him, and overcome the dictates of prudence, and the warning voice of his conscience. When Lucinda, shortly after, recovered from her swoon, he approached her with well-feigned sorrow, and in a mournful tone he spoke to the countess:

"I am not more fortunate than yourself.—The same messenger who brought you the intelligence of your irreparable loss, has also pierced my heart with the information that my beloved wife and darling child have both emigrated to the mansions of eternal peace and happiness."

"Then you have been visited not less dreadfully than myself," answered Lucinda, with a calmness quite unexpected to Gassler. "But," she added, "the stricken heart is soonest lulled to tranquillity in solitude and prayer. Therefore, Sir Gassler, leave me now!"

"That cannot be, lady," retorted Gassler, with impatience; "you are too weak just now, and need, moreover, the support of my strong arm."

"Then call Lady Eliza, or some of my servants," commanded the countess, sternly.

"That's quite unnecessary, if Sigismund Gassler is at your side," said the wily man, as he advanced a step towards the lady. "Pray do not take it amiss if I presume to remind your ladyship that Count Walter commissioned me as lord and protector of Rabenfels during his absence. And have you forgotten, too, the message to me before his death? Ah, you are to be excused. The wound in your heart has weakened your powers of memory. These were Count Walter's last words: 'Sigismund Gassler will care for my family.'"

Lucinda did not seem to hear these last words. She knelt before the picture of the count, leaning partly against a marble table, upon which stood the lamp. Its faint glimmering spread a weird light through the large