

THE LEAP FROM THE MAIN BRUCKE.

(From the German of Ludwig Storch.)

I.

It was past midnight—the lights on the stone-bridge which crosses the river Main at Frankfurt were still burning, though the footsteps of passengers had died away for some time on its pavement—when a young man approached the bridge from the town with hasty strides. At the same time, another man advanced in years was coming towards him from Sachsenhausen, the well-known suburb on the opposite side of the river. The two had not yet met, when the latter turned from his path, and went towards the parapet, with the evident intention of leaping from the bridge into the Main.

The young man followed him quickly, and laid hold of him.

"Sir," said he, "I think you want to drown yourself."

"You think right, sir; but what is that to you?"

"Nothing at all; I was only going to ask you to do me the favour to wait a few minutes, and allow me to join you. Let us draw close to each other, and, arm in arm, take the leap together. The idea of making the journey with a perfect stranger, who has chanced to come for the same purpose, is really rather interesting. Indeed, I have not experienced anything so exciting for some time; and I should not have thought that, in my last hour, so pleasant an occurrence would happen. Come, sir, for many years I have not made a request to any human being; do not refuse me this one, which must be my last. I assure you, I do not remember having ever spent so many words about any request whatever."

So saying, the young man held out his hand; his companion took it, and he then continued, with a kind of enthusiasm: "So be it; arm in arm—and now let us be quick about it; it is really charming to feel a human heart near me in these last moments. I do not ask what you are, good or bad—come, let us down."

The elder of the two, who had at first been in so great a hurry to end his existence in the waters of the river, now restrained the impetuosity of the younger.

"Stop, sir," said he, while his weary eye tried to examine the features of his companion as well as the flickering light of the nearest lamp would allow him—"Stop, sir; you seem to me too young to leave life in this way. I am afraid you are committing a rash act; for a man of your years, life must have still bright prospects."

"Bright prospects!—in the midst of rottenness and decay, falsehood and deceit, vice and corruption! Come, let us make an end of it."

"And so young! Your experience must have been very sad to make you consider all creatures which have the human form a brood of serpents."

"Oh, serpents are noble beings compared with men; they follow the impulses of their nature; they are no hypocrites, bearing virtue on their lips and vice in their hearts."

"I pity you from my heart; but there certainly are many exceptions to this miserable rule."

"I have found none," said the young man.

"Then it may be a consolation, though a poor one, that you have found one in this solemn hour. However much men are given to falsehood, there are very few who lie in the hour of death, within sight of eternity. But for me, I have never told a falsehood in my life, and I would not for anything in the world enter upon the dark road with a lie upon my lips; and therefore, when I tell you that I am not a villain, as you seem to think me, but an honest and upright man, I am telling you the simple, unvarnished truth."

"Indeed?—that is interesting. And so I must meet the only honest man ever I saw in the world, when I am on the point of leaving it, and in his own company."

"Let me go alone, and do you remain here. Believe me, there are many good and honest people who could render life charming for you. Seek them, and you are sure to find them."

"Well, the first one I have found already. But if life presents itself to you in hues so bright, I am surprised you should wish to leave it."

"Oh, I am only a poor old sickly man, unable to earn anything, and who can endure no longer that his only child, an angel of a daughter, should work day and night to maintain him, and even sometimes to procure him luxuries. No, sir, to allow this longer, I must be a tyrant, a barbarian."

"What, sir?" exclaimed the other, almost terrified, "you have an only daughter sacrificing herself for your sake?"

"And with what patience, what sweetness, what love, what perseverance. I see her sinking under her toil and her deprivation, and not a word of complaint escapes from her pallid lips. She works and starves, and still has always a word of love, an affectionate smile for her father."

"Sir, and you want to commit suicide! Are you mad?"

"Dare I murder that angel? The thought pierces my heart like a dagger," said the old man sobbing.

"Sir, you must have a bottle of wine with me; I see a tavern over yonder. Come, you must tell me your history; and, if you have no objection, I will then tell you mine. But this much I may say at once—there is no occasion for you to leap into the river. I am a rich, a very rich man; and if things really are as you represent, your daughter will no longer have to work, and you shall not starve."

The old man allowed himself to be dragged along by his companion. In a few minutes, they were seated at a table in the tavern, with full glasses before them, and each examining curiously the features of the other.

Refreshed and comforted by the effects of the wine, the old man began thus:

"My history is soon told. I am a mercantile man; but fortune never favoured me. I had no money myself, and I loved and married a poor girl. I could never begin business on my own account. I took a situation as book-keeper, which I held until I became useless from age, and younger men were preferred to me. Thus my circumstances were always circumscribed, but my domestic happiness was complete. My wife was an angel of love, kindness, and fondness, good and pious, active and affectionate; and my daughter is the true image of her mother. But age and illness have brought me to the last extremity, and my conscience revolts against the idea of the best child in the world sacrificing her life for an old useless fellow. I cannot have much longer to live; and I hope the Lord will pardon me for cutting off a few days or weeks from my life, in order to preserve or prolong that of my dear Bertha."

"You are a fortunate man, my friend," exclaimed the young man; "I have never seen a more fortunate one. What you call your misfortune is sheer nonsense, and can be cured at once. To-morrow I will make my will, and you shall be the heir of all my possessions, and to-morrow night I will take the leap from the Main Brucke alone. But before I leave this world I must see your Bertha, for I am anxious to look upon one who is worthy the name of a human being."

"But, sir, what can have made you so unhappy at this early age?" said the old man, moved with compassion.

"I believe it was my father's wealth. I am the only son of one of the richest bankers of Frankfurt; when I mention my name, you will be at once convinced of the truth of my assertion. My father died five years ago, and left me the heir to an immense fortune. From that moment, every one that has come in contact with me has endeavoured to deceive and defraud me. I was a child in innocence, trusting and confiding; my education had not been neglected, and I possessed my mother's loving heart. I endeavoured to associate myself in a union of love and friendship with good and generous people, but I found only hypocrites and impostors, who pretended friendship for no other purpose than to partake of my wealth, and enjoy themselves at my expense. My friends, or rather the villains whom I mistook for friends, and to whom I opened my heart, betrayed me, and then laughed at my simplicity; but in time I gathered experience, and my heart was filled with distrust. I was betrothed to a rich heiress, possessed of all fashionable accomplishments; I adored her with enthusiasm; her love, I thought, would repay me for every disappointment. But I soon saw that she was nothing more than a proud fool, who wished to make me her slave, and yoke all other men besides to her triumphal chariot. I broke off the engagement, and selected a poor but charming girl—a sweet innocent being, as I thought, who would be my life's own angel. Alas! I found her one day bidding adieu with tears and kisses to a youth whom she loved; she had accepted me for my wealth only. My peace of mind vanished; I sought diversion in travel; everywhere I found the same hollowness, the same treachery, the same misery. In short, I became disgusted with life, and resolved to put an end this night to the pitiable farce."

"Unfortunate young man," said the other, with tears of sympathy, "how deeply I pity you. I confess I have been more fortunate than you. I possessed a wife and a daughter, who came forth pure and immaculate from the hand of the Creator. The one has returned to Him in the whiteness of her soul, and so will the other."

"Will you give me your address, old man, and permit me to visit your daughter to-morrow? But you must also give me your word of honour that you will not inform her, or insinuate to her in any manner whatever, that I am a rich man."

The old man held out his hand.

"I give you my word; I am anxious to convince you that I have spoken the truth. My name is Wilhelm Schmidt, and here is my address." Giving him, at the same time, a bit of paper which he drew from his pocket.

"And my name is Karl T——. I am the son of Anton T——. Take these bank-notes, but only on condition that you do not leave this house until I fetch you from it. Waiter! a bedroom for this gentleman. You require rest, Herr Schmidt. Good-night. To-morrow you will see me again; but under whatever circumstances this may happen, do not forget the word you have given me."

The name the young man had mentioned, as well as the large sum, struck the old man with astonishment; but before he could recover himself, his companion had left the house, and the waiter came to light him to his bedroom, where, wearied and worn out, he soon sank into a profound sleep.

II.

In one of the narrow and ill-lighted streets of Sachsenhausen, in the attic of a lofty and unsightly house, sat a pretty blonde, about twenty years of age, busily employed with her needle. The furniture of the room was poor, but clean and tasteful; the girl's whole dress would not have fetched many kreutzers; but every article was as neat, and fitted her as well, as if it had cost hundreds. Her fair locks shaded a face brightened by a pair of eyes of heavenly blue, which bespoke a peaceful mind and a pure soul. The spirit of order, modesty, and cleanliness reigned in everything around her. Her features were delicate, like those of one nobly born; her eyes betrayed sleeplessness and anxiety, and ever and anon a deep sigh rose from the maiden's breast. Suddenly steps were heard on the staircase, and her face lighted up with joy; she listened, and doubt seemed to overshadow her brow. Then came a knock at the door, which made her tremble so much that she almost wanted the courage to say "Come in." A young man, shabbily dressed, entered the room, and made a low but awkward bow.

"I beg your pardon, Miss," said he, "does Herr Schmidt live here?"

"Yes, sir. What is your pleasure?"

"Are you his daughter Bertha?"

"I am."

"Then it is you that I seek. I come from your father."

"For Heaven's sake, where is he? What has happened? Something must have happened—this is the first time he has stayed away all night."

"The misfortune is not very great."

"Oh, my poor, poor father, what shall I hear?"

The young man seemed to observe the visible marks of anxiety with great interest; then, looking round the room, he said: "Do not be frightened, my dear girl; it is nothing of great importance. Your father met last night an old acquaintance, who invited him to a tavern. They had some wine together; but when the landlord came for his bill, your father's friend had decamped, and left him to pay the score. He had not sufficient money for this; and now the man will not let him go until he is paid, and declares that unless he gets his money he will send him to prison."

"To prison!—my father to prison?" exclaimed the girl.

"Can you tell me how much the bill comes to?"

"Three florins and a half."

"O God!" sighed the girl, "all I have does not amount to more than one florin; but I will go at once to Madame Berg, and beg of her to advance me the money."

"Who is Madame Berg?"

"The milliner for whom I work."

"But if Madame Berg does not advance the money—what then?" The girl burst into tears.

"I am much afraid she will refuse. I already owe her one florin, and she is very hard."

"For what purpose did you borrow the money you owe her?"

The girl hesitated to reply.

"You may trust me; I take the deepest interest in your misfortunes, and I sincerely wish I could assist you; but I am only a poor clerk myself. Tell me for what purpose did you borrow that florin?"

"Well, my father is very weak, and occasionally requires strengthening; I borrowed that money to get a quarter of a fowl for him."

"Under these circumstances, I fear Madame Berg will not give you any more. Here is one florin, but that is all I possess. Have you any valuables upon which we could raise some money?" Bertha considered for a moment.

"I have nothing," said she at length, "but my poor mother's prayer-book. On her death-bed, she entreated me not to part with it, and there is nothing in the world I hold more sacred than her memory and the promise I gave her; but still, for my father's sake, I must not hesitate." With a trembling hand, she took the book down from the shelf. "O sir," said she, "during many a sleepless night I have been accustomed to enter the secret thoughts of my heart on the blank leaves at the end of the book. I hope no one will ever know whose writing they are; will you promise me that?"

"Certainly, my dear Bertha. Do not alarm yourself; I will take care that your secrets shall not be profaned. But now get ready, that we may go."

Whilst she left the room to put on her bonnet and shawl, Karl T—— (for the reader will have guessed that the young man was no other than our hero) glanced over the writing of the girl in the book, and his eyes filled with tears of emotion and delight as he read the outpourings of a pure and pious heart; and when they had left the house together, and she was walking beside him with a dignity of which she seemed entirely unconscious, he cast upon her looks of respect and admiration.

They first went to Madame Berg, who did not give the advance required, but assured the young man that Bertha was an angel. Certainly this praise Mr. T—— valued higher than the money he had asked for. They pawned the book, and the required sum was made up. Bertha was overjoyed.

"But if you spend all your money to-day," remarked the young man, "on what will you live to-morrow?"

"I do not know, but I trust in God. I shall work the whole night through."

"Yes, trust in God firmly, and He will help you," exclaimed Karl with an enthusiasm which almost betrayed the emotion he felt.

When they came to the tavern, the young man went in first to prepare old Mr. Schmidt for the part he wished him to act; then he fetched Bertha. It is impossible to describe the joy he felt when he saw the young girl throw herself in her father's arms, and press him to her heart.

"O father," said she, "what a dreadful night have I had—how uneasy I have been about you; but, thank God, I have you again!" and her face brightened up with a smile of joy.

She paid the bill, and triumphantly led him home. T—— accompanied them, and said he had a few more kreutzers in his pocket; she had better go and get them something to eat. And then you should have seen this darling girl, how she busied herself, and how gladly she set about it; the young man felt as if he could fall at her feet and worship her. It was late before T—— went home that night; but the leap from the Main Brucke was no more thought of. He came to the house every evening, in order, as he said, to share with them his scanty earnings.

About a fortnight after, as he was going away one evening, he said to Bertha: "Will you become my wife? I am only a poor clerk, but I am honest and upright."

Bertha blushed, and cast her eyes to the ground.

"Can you love me, Bertha?" he asked again in an overflow of feeling.

She was silent and did not raise her head; but she held out her hand. He seized it, and kissed it fervently.

"Bertha," said he, "I love you immeasurably; you have saved my life."

A few days after the young couple, simply but respectably attired, and accompanied by Herr Schmidt, went to church, where they were married in a quiet way. When they came out man and wife, an elegant carriage was standing at the door, and a footman in rich livery let down the step.

"Come," said the happy husband to his bewildered wife, who looked at him with amazement.

Before she could utter a word, the three were seated in the carriage, driving away at a quick pace. The carriage stopped before a splendid house in the best part of Frankfurt. They were received by a number of domestics, who conducted them to apartments decorated in the most costly style.

"This is your mistress," said T—— to the servants; "and her commands you have henceforth to obey. My darling wife," said he then, turning to Bertha, "I am Karl T——, one of the wealthiest men of this city. This house is yours, and these servants will attend on you. I hold a pledge from you that riches will not corrupt your heart. Here it is, in the prayer-book of your poor mother, written by your own hand: 'If thou wert to give me all the treasures of the world, O Lord, I would still remain Thine humble servant. For what is gold before Thee, that lookest into the heart? Thine is my heart, and Thine it shall remain.'"

"It is the Lord's and thine, my beloved Karl," whispered Bertha, and sank in his arms.

"Hurrah for the leap from the Main Brucke!" exclaimed T——, embracing his father-in-law.

A PRETTY ORNAMENT.—A pretty ornament may be obtained by suspending an acorn by a piece of thread tied round it, within half an inch of the surface of some water contained in a vase, saucer, or tumbler, and allowing it to remain undisturbed for a number of weeks. It will soon burst open, and small roots will seek the water; a straight and tapering stem, with beautiful glossy green leaves, will shoot upward, and present a very pleasing appearance. Chesnut trees may be grown in this manner, but their leaves are not so beautiful as those of the oak. The water should be changed once a month, taking care to supply water of the same warmth. Bits of charcoal prevent the water from souring. If the little leaves turn yellow, put a grain of nitrate of ammonia in the vessel which holds the water, and it will renew their luxuriance.