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THE TREASURE OF THE HARZ.

[Translated from the German for the Catholic Mirror.]

CHAPTER I.

The corporation of the shepherds of Rotenburg, in Franconia, had met, according to their time-honored custom, in that little town, for their annual assembly.

The older and richer shepherds remained at the inn, where, seated around a long table covered with mugs and jugs of wine, they prepared to spend a sociable evening.

Among the most talkative was an old shepherd named Father Martin, a weird-looking patriarch, whose flowing locks and long beard had been whitened by the snows of eighty winters.

Comrades, you have told many adventures that smack of the marvelous and do credit to your imagination, and yet, without swerving from the truth, I might relate a certain story of my younger days which would eclipse all you have said.

When the old man commenced to speak, all conversation had ceased, but at his last remark there was a general cry:

Your story, Father Martin! your story, to close this day of pleasure!

And they all pressed him so much that the old shepherd could not resist. He took a long pull at the jug, smoked his pipe, wiped his dripping moustache on the cuff of his coarse jacket, and began:

My first steps in life were painful. An orphan from my early youth, I was left without friends or protection, and had to beg my daily bread from door to door.

I started, and for several hours I wandered through the thick woods, my dogs having struck a wrong trail. I was benighted and could not find my way, so I resolved to sleep under a tree and resume the search next morning.

As the spirit said these last words, my dog commenced barking, and I heard the distant rumble of wheels and the crack of a waggoner's whip.

Old Father Martin thus ended his story. Some of the listeners laughed, and told him it must be a dream he had had; others believed it implicitly, while the most circumspect looked very knowing and wise, and kept a discreet silence.

Well, Father Martin, did you ever visit the cave, and find out whether the spirit had told you the truth?

Not I, replied the old shepherd, I never moved a step to find that cave.

For two reasons—first, I did not care to expose myself to some trick of the evil one, and secondly, I have never found any one who could tell me how to discover the root 'Open-all,' where it grows, and at what particular time it must be sought.

It is written, said, thou shalt not listen to evil suggestions: Leave me, you monster; I will have nothing to do with you!

Finding that I could not be tempted, he ceased to insist, and merely added:

Thou shalt regret the lost opportunity.

Then, after remaining awhile in thoughtful silence, the spirit looked at me sadly and said: Remember well what I am going to tell thee; treasure my words, and some day when thou shalt have become more reasonable, thou mayest turn the information to profit.

The spirit then proceeded to tell me what I had to do to reach the treasure. His words are as fresh in my memory as if I had heard them yesterday.

Go, said he, to Mount Saint Andrew;—there inquire the way to the dark little valley known formerly as the King's Vale. There you will find a small stream, which you will follow until you reach a stone bridge built near a saw-mill.

You will have to crawl on all fours, for the tunnel is very low, and you had better carry a miner's lamp between your teeth.

Three doors open at the further end of this hall. The one on the right leads to the vault where lie the ashes of the former proprietor of the treasure; touch it not.

Do not hesitate, and fear not, for no harm will happen to you, though the door may open with a noise as loud as a clap of thunder.

Do not hesitate, and fear not, for no harm will happen to you, though the door may open with a noise as loud as a clap of thunder. You will be dazzled by the magnificence and splendor of the gems with which the walls of the cave are studded; but touch them not, it would be a sacrilegious theft.

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The disappointment of the innkeeper was relieved by another old shepherd exclaiming:

What a pity, Father Martin, that you have let your secret rust so long. Forty years ago you could have made use of the 'Open-all,' but now you are too old to climb the Brocken.

These particulars, so minutely described by old Blase, furnished new food for discussion, and it was past midnight when the assembly broke up.

Among the crowd of toppers, one old fellow had remained silent, but without losing a word of what had been said. This man was known as Master Peter Bloch.

He had married early, when fortune was smiling upon him, but had made an unhappy choice. Bess [such was Mrs. Bloch's familiar appellation] was a vixen in temper; she was gifted with a viper's tongue, that attacked friends as well as foes.

Their first child was a boy. The foolishly fond father spoiled him by continual indulgence.

What with too much eating and rough handling, little George died in his eighth year. But a second child, the pretty little Lucy, resisted both the stuffing process of her father and the scoldings of her mother.

Peter had found arithmetic the hardest study of his school days. It was a hard thing for him to keep the debtor and creditor sides of his expense-book properly balanced.

The Town Council appointed Peter Bloch superintendent of the public water-works. But luck was against Peter. Some epidemic having broken out in Rotenburg, the report spread that the Jews had poisoned the basins.

Poor Peter had never been remarkable for energy, and this last blow prostrated him completely. Bess undertook the buying and retailing of flour, a business that did not pay very large profits.

Peter became the beast of burden, and thus earned his scanty allowance of food by hard work, and often also earned hard knocks—any little neglect or act of resistance on his part being sure to receive condign punishment at the hands of his shrewish half, as deliberate as if he had been in reality a donkey.

Lucy grieved much to see her poor father ill-treated. She had become very expert in all sorts of needle-work, and earned a great deal for a girl of her age; but she handed regularly her gains to her mother.

He thought of his daughter with fond pride, mingled with sorrow; for on that day a young man named Fridolin, who loved her, had asked him her hand, and he had been obliged to refuse, for he could not give her the smallest dowry.

His interest and curiosity were aroused by Father Martin's story, but when the sequel came, and old Blase explained so minutely the manner to procure the magic root, Peter became all ears; he believed implicitly in what the two shepherds said, and resolved to attempt the discovery of the treasure.

When Peter Bloch reached his humble home the idea of a visit to the Brocken had become a settled plan in his mind. His only regret was that it was not yet spring, and he would have to wait some months before he could procure the famous 'Open-all'; but now he had hope to sustain him and strengthen him.

The morning dawn found him finishing his task. Bess was an early riser; coming up unexpectedly she surprised poor Peter, pen in hand.

You drunkard? cried the amiable wife, you have spent the long night at the wine-shop, drinking the money you rob me of daily!

Master Peter was too much accustomed to matrimonial storms to mind the first squall. It was in a very unruffled tone that he answered:

My dear wife, don't get mad. I am thinking of something that will make us rich and happy.

You find a way to make money? exclaimed the irate dame. You fool, what have you been writing there?

My will, said he; I don't know when I may die, and I want to arrange my affairs.

Lucy, who overheard this commenced crying; she thought her father might have a presentiment of approaching death. But Dame Bess was not so soft-hearted.

Your will? she cried, and she laughed ironically; your will! you inveterate, good-for-nothing drunkard. You have squandered all we had, and you talk of making a will. What have you to bequeath?

Peter desisted to reply, or was probably not disposed to a passage-of-arms with his wife. He shrugged his shoulders and went about his usual drudgery of carrying meal bags on his back to and from the mill.

Spring was approaching, and Master Peter had completed his preparations. Denying himself even his little allowance of wine, he had hoarded every cent obtained from the filial devotion of Lucy. With this money he had bought a large valise made of stout leather; that, and a strong stick cut in the forest, completed his equipment.

last, one honest little fellow came breathless to tell him he had found a black woodpecker. Peter rewarded the urchin generously, and from that day followed with the utmost solicitude the progress of modification of the woodpecker.

He still wanted one thing, however. Red cloth had long since gone out of fashion, and he had been unable to procure any. One individual only was known to possess a crimson cloak, and that was the town hangman. Peter had always hesitated to approach this dread personage; but he screwed up his courage, and having called on him, obtained the loan of the garment for a small consideration.

Master Bloch returned home with head erect, and a happy expression on his face, but his wife's sharp attacks failed to dispel, at which she was much surprised and not a little mortified.

He resolved to decamp during their absence. He had already shouldered his valise, when he bethought himself of a large safe, secured by seven heavy locks, the keys of which never left his wife's girdle. It was there the prudent Bess kept her hoards: not only her gains, but little sums presented from time to time to Lucy by her godfather.

Peter reflected awhile, and arguing that he was going to possess wealth compared to which this hoarded money would be like a drop of water in a lake, he swept the little piles in his capacious pocket to pay his travelling expenses. This done he pushed back the door, which closed of itself, and started gaily, after shutting the street door, and putting the key in his pocket.

It was passed noon when Bess and Lucy returned home. They stood aghast when they found the door locked and that no one answered their knocks. After much delay, and when Bess had made herself hoarse calling Peter in the shrillest tones, she sent for the locksmith to open the door.

Lucy sat bathed in tears, for she loved dearly her old father, and Bess could not remain deaf to the voice of her conscience, reproaching her with the ill-usage which had driven her husband away, perhaps to the commission of some dreadful act. She could conceal no longer the terror of her thoughts.

Poor Lucy had not dreamed of anything so dreadful. A yell of horror escaped her, and she fell senseless. When she revived, it was to give way to a paroxysm of uncontrollable grief.

As soon as it was day, Bess engaged some men to drag the river; nothing was found. The most diligent inquiries gave no clue to the mysterious disappearance of Peter. He had left the town when everybody was at church, and no one had noticed him.

Lucy still mourned, but the practical Bess made up her mind to bear with her loss. Still, something troubled her mind, who should carry the bags to the mill? She must buy an ass without delay, or her business would suffer.

She acted with her customary active energy; a good strong animal was selected, the price agreed upon, and the owner, told to come to the house for his money, Bess took her keys and went to the safe—it was empty! The truth flashed to her mind. Peter had robbed her and went to enjoy life and freedom. She burst out in angry exclamations and maledictions so loud that Lucy ran up, terribly frightened to see what was the matter. When the poor child learned the truth, she clasped her hands and danced for joy. Her dear father was not dead; what did she care for that! I have a right to know the truth! she cried, and she went to the door. The door was open, and she stepped out. The wicked boys sent him, on many a fool's errand, to nests of crows and blackbirds; but at last, one honest little fellow came breathless to tell him he had found a black woodpecker.