

GRETCHEN.

A LEGEND OF THE RHINE.

BY JOHN LESPERANCE.

I.

Gretchen sat at the cottage door spinning the white wool. Her beautiful eyes were drooped over her work, and whether it was the attention which the labor required, or some other thoughts which occupied her, she raised not her head from the thread. It was a mild summer evening, the air was soft and balmy, the trees and shrubs that bordered the white road waved noiselessly in the breeze that came across the western fields laden with the odor of ripe grain. At that blessed hour the hard labors of the day are about to close, and twilight of rest and quietude begins with a thanksgiving to the Lord for the favors imparted to his servants. What was Gretchen waiting for there at the cottage door, spinning the white wool?

Old Max, her father, had donned his blue bonnet for the night, and having charged his long porcelain pipe, was feeding the poultry in the barnyard. Katrin, his wife, was bustling to and fro, preparing the supper. What was Gretchen waiting for?

She sang a sweet *lied* in which the simple words were admirably adapted to a charming melody, after the usual fashion of German popular songs. The refrain was as follows:

He comes, he comes from the plain,
Laden with golden grain,
My Hans, my heart's devotion!

II.

A horseman gorgeously dressed moves jauntily up the road. Spying the cottage, he moderates his speed, as if to enjoy leisurely the calm and repose which it seemed to betoken. On reaching the door his eyes are fascinated, he checks his horse, and bending over the pommel of his saddle, politely exclaims:

"Good evening, madchen."

The maiden smiled and blushed over her work.

"Wouldst thou give a thirsty traveler a draught of water?"

"Oh, sir, with pleasure," she murmured; and, rising from her work, curtsied as she entered within.

Old Max had risen from his seat at the postern and drawn a long whiff. Katrin stood erect on the hearth eyeing the handsome rider.

He had fallen back into his saddle, and, taking off his plumed hat, shook his black, glossy curls and wiped his brow.

Gretchen came along timidly with a goblet in each hand.

"There is water for thee, and wine to strengthen the draught," she said.

"I thank thee, beautiful madchen," replied he. "What is this—Hochheimer?"

"Of the very best, my lord."

"Tis a costly wine." And he looked up at the cottage, as if he would say that this wine accorded not with its poverty.

"Oh, it is part of my father's wage, and we keep it for sick neighbors or tired travelers like to thee."

The cavalier drank a long draught of water; then pouring all the wine into the remainder, raised the goblet, saying, "To thy health, beautiful fraulein," and tossed it off. Then, instead of pursuing his journey, he remained intently gazing on the girl, who was at first a little disconcerted, but soon recovering, turned to her wheel, where she at once began spinning. The old folk stood stock still where they were, one on the postern threshold, the other on the family hearth. The stranger suddenly leaped out of his saddle, and noosing the bridle on his arm, advanced to the trellis behind which Gretchen was spinning.

"Pardon me, fraulein, but I would know thy name," said he, with a winning manner and in a low voice.

"Gretchen Kiebler, the gardener's daughter, may it please you," answered she, promptly and frankly.

And one rapid arch glance of her's seemed to demand his name in compensation.

"My name is Christern, Count von Vogelstein," bending forward and leaning his arms against the trellis bars.

At the sound of the name Gretchen opened wide her blue eyes, but said not one word. Katrin, on the contrary, clasped her hands and exclaimed, "Heilige mutter Gottes!" while old Max, drawing his pipe from his mouth, ejaculated, "Mein Gott!"

Count Christern, not heeding the effect of his words, gazed attentively on the beautiful blonde spinner.

"Gretchen," said he, softly.

The girl looked up for all answer.

"Gretchen, 'tis a happy day for me. I am glad to see and know thee."

"Ah! sir," she answered, with hesitation, "I am a poor country girl and thou honorest me overmuch."

"Thou art a village queen, liebchen, and it is an honor to have thy friendship, not to say thy love."

"Oh, Count, do not flatter and laugh at the lowly."

Here Katrin sat down upon a low bench, and old Max leaned against the door, eagerly listening to the colloquy to see how it would go.

"Nay, I speak what my heart believes. Oh fraulein, and may I ask thee whether thou wilt attend the village festival to-morrow?"

Gretchen had indeed intended to go, and had made preparations accordingly, but she feared to

compromise herself by an affirmative answer. The Count repeated his question, and seeing that she still doubted, he passed his arm through the leaves of the trellis, seized her hand, pressed it to his lips, and exclaimed affectionately:

"Say yes, madchen."

And Gretchen said "yes," in a whisper.

Christern threw the bridle on his horse's neck, vaulted into the saddle, and kissing his hand to the trembling girl, rode away at a brisk speed.

Max and Katrin simultaneously sprang to the door to see him off.

"A glorious fellow," said Max, with a certain enthusiasm.

"How handsome," added Katrin, "and a Count in the bargain, eh, Gretchen?" turning toward the girl, whose head was bent fixedly upon her work, and who seemed desirous to drown her mother's voice in the noise of her wheel. Her cheek was on fire, tears were in her eyes, and her golden locks flashed softly in the declining sunlight.

III.

With a ringing laugh and a merry song, up from the harvest field came Hans, the farmer's son, and stood before the trellis in bonnet and blouse, with his sharp sickle on his arm. A brawny boy was Hans, and handsome, with the manly beauty of genuine Teuton type. Broad, square face, blue eyes, short neck, and a wealth of yellow hair waving in locks upon his ample shoulders.

"Good evening, Gretchen," said he, laying one hand upon her shoulder, and with the other stopping her wheel; but withdrawing both immediately. "Why, what is the matter with thee, child? Art thou ill?"

"Oh, no, there is nothing the matter with me, Hans. I am well; and see what a deal I have spun to-day."

"Nay, but thou art pale, as though thou wert unwell. Perhaps thou hast labored overmuch."

Here old Katrin stepped behind the lad and tapped him on the shoulder, winking slyly at him.

"Thou knowest not, boy, who was here even now," she said.

"I saw the Count spur down the road a few moments ago, but of course he did stop here to disturb the peace of common folk."

The girl blushed scarlet and looked her lover full in the face. The farmer's son was not so simple as not to discover at once that the Count really had something to do with the perturbation of his sweetheart.

"Speak out, I entreat you," looking around. "What is the meaning of all this?"

The maid bent her head upon the trellis and said nothing; seeing which, Katrin, with great volubility, related the whole incident of the nobleman's visit, embellishing it as she went on, and expressing more than once her admiration of the beauty and gentility of the unexpected visitor. Hans listened in feverish agitation. His soul went through a gradation of strange feelings unknown to him before. He doubted, he feared, he grieved, an indefinite vengeance rose within him; and by the time the old dame had finished her story, he was overwhelmed under the influence of these tumultuous passions.

He turned his look upon Gretchen and gazed at her with an expression of concern and reproach. She kept her head bent over her work as if unwilling to meet his eye.

"Gretchen," said he, after a long pause, "how am I to explain all this? Art thou about to abandon the faithful friend who has loved thee from childhood? Will wealth and rank bewilder thee so that they shall prevail in thy mind over true and honest love?"

The young man's voice was choked and he could say no more.

Gretchen suddenly raised her face; it was radiant with smiles.

"Shame on thee!" she exclaimed, "for thy ill humor. I have a mind to get angry at thy reproaches," and she placed her hand in his.

The youth was completely disarmed. Not noticing the effort which Gretchen was making to conceal her real feelings, he timidly and bashfully begged pardon for his offence. However, he had a vague impression that all was not right; for, on taking leave a few moments afterwards, he failed, designedly or not, to demand the accustomed evening embrace, and the old people remarked with surprise that their daughter did not offer it.

Hans returned home in the twilight with doubts and fears agitating his mind in spite of him.

Gretchen set about arranging the tea-things, and once or twice, as if to relieve her thoughts, went to the door, and, looking out into the gloom, murmured pityingly:

"Poor Hans!"

IV.

The evening advanced. The harvest moon arose calm and clear—not a flat circle of silver, but a limpid, translucent ball of liquid crystal, slightly swaying in the blue sky. The grain field with its sheaves, the occasional forests, the far off cliffs, the windings of the highway, and the line of the distant river, were all brought out distinctly to view, forming a panorama of magical loveliness.

Rhineland! Beautiful Rhineland! Who that has seen thee once can forget thee? Alpine scenery is sublime; the Italian landscape is gorgeous and suggestive of profusion and abundance; England, with its shaven downs and trim cottages, is the home of ease and comfort; but thou, Land of the Rhine, with thy "castled crags" and purple vineyards, thy quaint old

hamlets and teeming harvest fields, and thy classic river winding around and through them all, thou combinest beauty, comfort and grandeur.

Gretchen, when the household labors were over, stole out into her father's garden and leaned upon the hedge. One by one she took in the objects of the landscape before her, till gradually and insensibly her thoughts turned inward, and under the influence of the calm night she fell into a waking dream.

She dreamed of fortune, of costly dresses and rich domains, of obsequious maids and liveried servants, of gems from distant seas and jewels from deepest mines.

She dreamed of pleasure, of the ball, the banquet, the levee; the concerts of lute and harpsichord; the jubilant choruses of many voices; the chase with hound and falcon, and rides on ambling palfrey, or in chariots with empannelled escutcheon.

She dreamed of happiness, of existence without toil, of fruition without alloy, with her every want supplied, her every desire fulfilled. How pleasant to pass a long life luxuriantly reclining in bowers of bliss, and lulled to slumber by the music of cool fountains!

Now and then a shadow passed across the brightness of her dream, as the light clouds rising from the bosom of the Rhine obscured for a moment the light of the moon; and the name of Hans escaped from her lips; but it was a moment only, and she resumed her reverie. At length the moon that had illumined the raptured, beaming face of the girl, and shed a fairy brightness on her dreams, disappeared from the sky and it was very dark. Was this an omen of the future? Gretchen awoke, and terrified by the gloom, fled into the house.

V.

Next day there was a village festival, where all the peasantry, now that the harvest labors were over, came to rejoice and make merry on the village green. Early in the morning every road leading to the village was crowded with country people. After the German fashion, all the children, even the youngest, accompanied their parents. They closed their houses, barns and farm-yards for the day, and in every variety of vehicle, on foot, made for the village. All promised well for the success of the festival. Ample preparations had been made, and the weather, so variable at the close of summer, was unusually fine. At eight o'clock a herald mounted the tribune in front of the church, and by an impromptu fanfare, announced the opening of the feast. The inhabitants, under the direction of improvised marshals, ranged themselves in order—the children in front, the men on one side, the women on the other, and headed by the minister in sacerdotal robes, entered the temple of God. Divine service was offered in thanksgiving for the abundant harvest of garden and field. The pastor made them an stirring exhortation. The whole people sang hymns in unison, accompanied by a powerful organ.

There is something impressive in the chant of a large congregation; but I never realized the sublime in music so thoroughly as when I heard for the first time the trained voices—and every voice in Germany is more or less trained—of a thousand German chorists intoning their *Grosser Gott wir loben dich*. It seemed as though long rhythmic billows of sound arose from the nave and moved toward the altar, and there massed up, still up and heavenward to the foot-stool of God.

After the service came the amusements of the day. The children rushed out of the church to begin their games. The goodmen scattered in groups about the plain; the housewives assumed their appointed stations at the booths; the old folks sat down under the trees, near the church, when they could witness all that took place. Presently all was bustle on the common. Loud talking, boisterous laughing, occasional songs, bursts of music were heard on every side. Men moved to and fro, women chattered over their wares or gossiped at all they saw, children ran in and out intent on play. Noon arrived, and a magnificent rural repast was spread upon the grass. This increased the frolic and the merriment. All were pleased—all, save two, Hans and Gretchen. He had taken little part in the sports of the morning—had kept aloof from Gretchen—had not claimed his place beside her at the lunch. She had made no advance to meet him; though her eyes had encountered his more than once, they bore no invitation in their glance. She had spent all her time among the women of the booths selling flowers. She was not sad, but anxious and expectant.

After the long-protracted meal, the amusements of the day were resumed with a fresh impulse. A dance on a gigantic scale was organized; the sturdy peasants and their buxom wives and daughters tripped over the green with wondrous agility, executing figures which would have done honor to the skill of modern adepts in the art.

While the excitement was at its height, a stranger arrived on the scene. He was a handsome fellow, middle-aged, medium-sized, and dressed as a Jager, with tasseled cap, green jerkin, buskin tights and elegant topboots. A silver hunting horn was slung across his shoulder by a white band, and his polished black belt was fastened by a clasp tastefully embossed with antlers of pearl.

Those who were not engaged in the dance eyed him with curiosity.

"Who can it be?" asked fifty voices in a whisper.

"Some nobleman's page," said one.

"Or, perhaps, some nobleman in disguise," answered another.

"How handsome and well dressed!" exclaimed the women.

"A perfect huntsman!" exclaimed the men.

The stranger looked around a while upon the merry group, and as though he had discovered the person whom he sought, advanced towards a crowd who formed a circle round the dancers. He stopped before a young girl, bowed and offered his hand—it was to Gretchen.

"Count Christern!" ejaculated Max and Katrin, so loud that they could be heard by all the old folk sitting under the trees.

Hans, who was reclining on the grass at some distance, dropped his arm heavily upon the ground and muttered in anguish:

"Tis the Count!"

Gretchen hesitated a moment, blushed, smiled, then yielding her form to the arm of Von Vogelstein, was instantaneously whirled into the dizzy mazes of the dance. A thrill ran through the crowd of dancers. Without knowing why—for they had seen nothing of the Count's arrival or movements—they felt, as vast assemblages often feel—some invincible influence which impelled them to redouble their efforts. Louder twanged the music, eyes flashed brighter, bosoms heaved more rapidly, the breath came and went convulsively, the spectators sent up cheer upon cheer, and the daisied greensward fairly shook under the pitter of a thousand feet executing fantastic lines and evolutions. It was a moment of frenzy, but it could not last. One after another partners gave way and sank upon the grass, exhausted with fatigue, till there remained upon the plain, in the midst of a brilliant figure, only the Jager and his blonde.

They checked their movement on perceiving that they were alone, and walked off together to the extremity of the green.

The dance over, the gossip began.

It had become known to all that the stranger was Count Christern. Some of the men blamed him for intruding among the peasantry; others praised him for it. Among the women, especially the young ones, there was an outcry against Gretchen for dancing and promiscuous with the Count. There were some, however, who saw no harm in it. True, Gretchen was only a gardener's daughter; but she was a good girl, and the Count was a worthy man.

And supposing he loved her, would a marriage come of it?

Some thought it would be a great misfortune. Some thought it would be a great blessing. Thus we differ in all things. But who was right? Time will tell.

And Max and Katrin, what did they think of all this?

Max and Katrin were evidently delighted and honored at the Count's attention to their daughter, and took no pains to conceal their satisfaction. Gretchen also was certainly flattered by the nobleman's friendship and love for her!

Were they right? Time will tell.

Only we, who have roved over the world a little, and learned a few of the mysteries of life, we cannot help shrugging our shoulders and murmuring:

"Poor thoughtless parents—poor simple girl!"

But whilst we are thus gossiping, night has fallen, and our honest peasants must return to their farms. Chanting the litanies of the Virgin, they wend homeward through the golden harvest fields.

Christern and Gretchen had preceded them.

After the dance, the Count conducted the girl to the "Red Swan," where horses awaited him. He offered a milk-white palfrey to Gretchen. It was gentle as a lamb and fleet as a deer. Was this the palfrey of her dream? They mounted, and followed by their squires, rode gaily along till they reached the home of Gretchen. There, after helping her to dismount, he accompanied her to the threshold. They had conversed together during the whole journey, and he closed the discourse with these words:

"Art thou resolved, madchen?"

"I am," was the firm reply.

"Next Michaelmas, then," said he.

"Yes, Count," answered she.

And the Count departed with his retainers.

(To be continued.)

HUMOROUS.

THE individual who called tight boots comfortable defended his position by saying they made a man forget all his other miseries.

A boy whose teacher proposed to give him "Wych Hazel," Miss Warner's new story, replied: "No you don't. I catch that often enough at home."

It is remarked that with an ulcer in winter and fall, and a duster in the spring and summer, it makes comparatively little difference to the philosopher how pantaloon are cut.

A GEORGIA jury thought they were doing a smart thing when they brought in the verdict: "We, the jury, unanimously agree to disagree." They didn't think it was so smart when the judge responded, "I, the Judge, unanimously fine you \$5 each."

A HUNTER sees a squirrel in a tree. Just as he is about to shoot at him the squirrel puts the trunk of the tree between himself and the hunter. The hunter follows after the squirrel, but as he advances the squirrel retreats, with the trunk always between himself and the hunter. Does the hunter ever go around the squirrel?

THIS is the season to buy those mysterious packages from your grocer, to find out that "early peas" mean "pop corn," and "mammoth squash" means "crooked-handled gourds," while something else that you buy to grow bonnets for your oldest girl's head, comes up a horribly enterprising vine with a diabolical smell, that runs all over your house and drops soft little worms down the back of your neck at frequent intervals during the summer.