



# CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

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## ROSAURA AND HER KINSFOLK.

### CHAPTER IV.

The high-arched apartment in which they sat, looked somewhat strange and solemn; though, on the whole, it was neither dismal nor yet unlike what such rooms usually are in ancient castles; and though, at first sight, it seemed to the count that of two portraits of armed knights which hung on the wall, one bore a striking resemblance to himself, and the other to the colonel, yet he soon dismissed the notion as the deceitful play of some excited fancy. What had fixed his attention upon these two pictures more than the others around them, was only that the knight whom he likened to himself was represented as young and very pale, and in the midst of blazing flames; and the other, which appeared to resemble the colonel, was very old, but of a wild dark red complexion, and encircled by a deep black cloister-arch.

He would have inquired about these two portraits, but Haldenbach interrupted him, saying with a pleasant smile:

"You please me well, young soldier, in that hunting dress of yours; and it pleases me still more that you have only put it on for the chase, and that you did not travel yesterday in it, but in your proper uniform. In this you are unlike too many officers of the present day, who can scarcely leave the garrison, or even the parade, three steps behind them, but they must straightway be changed from head to foot into fashionable citizens."

"I comply not in the least degree with such fashions," replied Julius: "for to me it is quite insupportable to be without my armor, however much and eloquently people may talk of the Greeks and Romans not being seen with a sword in time of peace. A hunting-dress, however, is quite agreeable to me; it reminds me of the good old German custom, according to which no freeman was allowed to appear without his blade at his side."

"Spoken after my own heart, young knight. And then you place your sword by your bedside during the night, do you not?"

And on Julius replying that he did, the old man pressingly exhorted him never to leave off this good custom, not even in the midst of hospitality; and it would be better for many a one, continued he in an under-tone, "if they were also to fasten the inner bolts of their sleeping chamber—all the three bolts, I mean; but indeed I cannot and will not dictate to you, my brave young fellow; and so let us off to the hunt."

Wildeck's groom awaited his master in the yard with the noble Abdul, and beside him stood the old huntsman, his companion of yesterday, with a black horse as strange in appearance, though richly and antequely adorned, as that which he rode on their wild journey.

"You have your choice," said the colonel;—"your horses are tolerably fatigued with their journey; and the powerful far-famed rider Count Julius Wildeck will certainly stand in little fear of the stout, though ill-bred and ungallant, animals which I bring among these mountains, since I, an old invalid, ride one of them every day."

Julius swung himself, light as a feather, into the saddle of the prancing animal, and soon reined him in so skillfully, that the colonel, while they both galloped down the descent, cried out to him:

"Thy father might well have called thee Alexander! for truly this mad animal is a kind of Eucephalus! But yet Julius is a world-conquering name, and perhaps falls more pleasantly upon the ladies' ears. Now for it, my Julius! To-day the boars must bleed!"

The boars bled; and, on the whole, a very knightly hunt was held, from which they did not return until the evening was far advanced. On the way the colonel became more silent and serious, though he had before shown himself so cheerful and communicative. When they ascended the stairs he took leave of Julius immediately, excusing himself by saying that over-fatigue must deprive him of the pleasure of entertaining him at the supper-table; adding, too, that probably he might not be better for some days. The old man then hastened to his chamber, which, to Julius' astonishment, was not only locked within, but was also well secured outside by the old scarred huntsman with three strong bolts. The strange servant rattled the bars twice, as if trying whether the fastenings were secure, then walked away silently, shaking his head and sighing.

Julius, thus strangely warned by the remarkable caution of his host, thought again of his inquiry in the morning; he could not, it is true, prevail upon himself to draw the bolts—it looked to him almost like a piece of cowardice; but he turned the key of the lock after he had dismissed his attendant, and in a very different frame of mind from yesterday, betook himself to rest. "I am not now on out-guard," said he, smiling to himself; and endeavored to compose himself to sleep, in which he at last succeeded.

It might be about midnight when he was awoke by a strange rattling. It seemed to him almost as if a fast-locked door had been broken open. He thought of robbers—but how could they make their way into the moat and wall-enclosed castle? Meanwhile he heard the watchman quietly blowing his horn, and calling out: it was clear moonlight; the dogs were all quiet.—He laid himself down again to sleep. Presently, however, he heard plainly the sound of some one groping his way up in the dark along the wall of the winding stone stair. Julius looked round for his good sword. He now heard the figure approach the door, rattle a huge bunch of keys, and begin first to draw the latch, and at last heavily and slowly to turn the lock itself. "Who is there?" cried Julius, throwing himself out of bed, and pulling his cloak over him, while he seized his bright blade. No answer. "Who is there?" cried he a second time. A hoarse hollow laugh.

### CHAPTER V.

In his eager pursuit of a wild boar, our hero had been led far away and alone, over hill and valley, till at last all trace of his prey was lost; he hung his gun upon the branch of an oak, and sat down fatigued among the long grass under its shade.

The straggling sunbeams through the reddened autumnal foliage, the ever-green fir-branches, holding a low soft converse with the breeze, the parting cry of the birds of passage, the heavenly canopy overspread with many-tinted clouds, all conspired to send a deep sadness into his soul—a kind of feeling which he had been familiar with even from his earliest years, when often, even in the midst of his mirthful sport, and unseen of all the world, warm tears would flow down the cheeks of the otherwise cheerful boy; and now, too, a moist drop sparkled in his eye, and he said to himself:

"These might have been designed to foreshow how cruelly the world would deal with a true heart." Then he hid his burning face in his hands, and sighed "Rosaura!" The tones of a cittern sounded, not far distant, in his ears, and he heard plainly sung the following words, in a voice which seemed to be interrupted by violent weeping:

"Wildeck! thou noble deer so good.  
Wildeck! thou gentle roe;  
Why stray'st thou in and out of the wood,  
Thy heart so full of woe?  
Let that a warning to thee tell  
Which once thy ancestors befall!  
Shun, Wildeck! shun the dangerous beat,  
Bold looks not ever will defeat."

All was again still. Julius scarce knew if he was awake or in a dream. He had heard the fearful tale, how once, in ancient times, many of his ancestors, men and women, had been burned to death, through an unaccountable fire breaking out in their own castle, and how his great-grandfather alone was saved in a wonderful manner, whereby the noble race of a noble stem was preserved from extinction. But who in this place could know the tale? Who could thus warn him here? Or was it only some popular rhyme brought hither in some accidental way? But the voice was broken by sobbing! And ah! it sounded so sweet, so lovely!

Again it was heard nearer—  
"Wildeck! the murderer comes this way;  
Thou, Wildeck, have a care;  
Askest—Who may the murderer be?  
'Tis I, the murderer here."

Julius sprang up angrily from the ground and grasped his hunting-knife; he thought of the fearful huntsman. "But, fool," whispered he to himself, "it is a woman's voice that sings. Surely it is but a snatch of some traditional song on the former misfortunes of our house. But ah! sing not quite so sweetly—not quite so plainly to be recognized. O Rosaura!" And he sank back into his former seat, covering his glowing face with his hands.

Then he heard a rustling waving sound among the grass near him, while the branches of the oak rattled over his head, as if to warn him.—He sprang up; the gun which he intrusted to the noble old tree was gone.

He looked indignantly round—no one could be seen. "A fine huntsman!" said he, marking to himself, "who takes such care of his arms!—And such a weapon, too—the favorite piece of a dear parent! But stay—I must find it again. By mine honor, I shall not leave this strange mountain till I have recovered it." And with keen looks, proper to him both as a soldier and a huntsman, he hastened through the trees, and along the ground, and at last discovered the traces of a light, soft footstep. "Good heavens!" said he, with an inward shudder, "it is a woman who has wandered hither and robbed me of my weapon!" He followed resolutely the scarcely discerned path, and in a short time emerged from the copse-wood, and found himself near to an old grey castle, with steep walls; and if his senses did not deceive him, it was the same as he passed on his journey to Finsterborn, with the scarred huntsman.

While he stood musing on this, he suddenly

felt his hunting-cap torn from his head, a ball whizzed quickly through it and struck against the nearest fir-tree. He reeled involuntarily back, not knowing rightly whether he was wounded or not. Then fearfully sung a female voice—

"Askest—Who may the murderer be?  
'Tis I, the murderer here."

Julius bethought himself: the shot had only pierced his cap; he drew it again over his head—and seized his hunting knife, ready for attack. There stood against him a female form, holding in her hand his own gun, which he had just lost; snow white was her robe—raven black her wildly flowing tresses—fiercely rolling her dark eye. O Heavens!—no doubt remained, it was Rosaura!

She looked menacingly at him once more, and threw him his gun, saying—  
"The murderer here am I."

A band of females now rushed hastily out of a neighboring thicket, wrapped Rosaura with a veiled covering, and led her away. Julius heard her weeping bitterly. "I trust, in God's name," cried he, "no one means to do her any harm!"

"Be calm, Count Wildeck," said Rosaura's aunt, whom he now recognized among the other ladies; "Rosaura of Haldenbach is in the best and kindest hands; and if you will do her a real kindness, then depart hence as quickly as possible, and let nothing pass your lips of what happened to you in these mountains."

She disappeared with a gracious and earnest farewell. Julius took up his gun, and in deep astonishment pursued his uncertain way towards Finsterborn.

The evening darkened as the strayed huntsman wearily ascended a lofty rock, the summit of which was yet glittering in the last golden rays of the setting sun, in order, if possible, to discover from thence some beaten path, or the top of a tower which might serve him as a guide. On reaching the point of the rock, he saw some one already seated there, with his back turned towards him, and his legs dangling over the steep precipice beyond. Fearing lest, by a too sudden advance, he might dangerously alarm the stranger in his perilous position, Julius remained standing; the other turned round—it was the terrible huntsman.

Quick as lightning he stood on his feet, and with a respectful greeting, calmly approached Julius. The latter hardly knew how to conduct himself, alone with this awful being, on such a dizzy height. The scarred hunter probably read some some such apprehension in his countenance. He smiled and said:

"Do not fear, sir count; I am not mad. But my master, Col. Haldenbach, surnamed Death-brand, is so. I see well enough you think that I speak from a crazed brain; but I will tell you all in order. Only be pleased to sit down by me, for I am tired to death" (and with this he resumed his giddy seat); "or should the good count be somewhat afraid, let him stand; but do not let him charge my old age with unpoliteness."

Julius, to whom the thought of being taxed with fear was more dreadful than almost any other earthly danger, placed himself in a moment by the side of the old man, who then spoke as follows:

"Five hundred years ago, the noble counts of Wildeck celebrated in their ancestral castle a very joyful harvest feast, and drank wine and mead. They had brought thither their wives and children, and only waited, in order to complete their enjoyment, for the arrival of a knight who was related to their family, by name Haldenbach. But the knight had been already within the walls of the castle for some time, though they knew it not. He was lurking far below, deep in the dungeon-vaults, whither he had stealthily penetrated by a hidden passage; and because one of the daughters of the house had repulsed his suit with disdainful coldness, he thought he could not otherwise satisfy his revenge than by destroying the whole castle and its inmates. He set fire, therefore, to all the gates and stairs of the unguarded edifice; all the Wildecks were burned to death, with their wives and children, save only one little boy, whom the nurse, to preserve his beautiful complexion, had carried into the moonlight and sprinkled with dew. That boy was thy progenitor, young hero. But among the betrayed Wildecks there was one old man, a soothsayer; he stood amid the glowing mass, on the top of the last tottering wall, and sang forth words of strange prophecy in the night-wind.—He had a fearful spell upon the race of Haldenbach—that all their descendants should be struck with madness every half year towards the hour of midnight, and that this should last each time for the space of three weeks—God knows what sacred meaning may be signified by those numbers—and this curse is to remain as long as a single Wildeck is alive upon the earth, unless—but the rest of the prophecy was drowned in the storm, and smoke, and flame; the wicked Haldenbach, in the fierce agony of his distracted conscience, could gather no more. No way of escape is

known; and twice a year during three weeks, all the Haldenbachs are, about midnight, and sometimes also towards the evening hour, smitten with madness. Alas! even that beautiful young lady Rosaura is regularly seized with this inherited malady; therefore it was that I rode with you so secretly past her castle. For to see an angel like her clutched by such demon-fury, this, indeed, is too horrible!

"But if the last Wildeck were dead," whispered Julius, while he bent himself forward toward the brink of the precipice.

"Sir count, you are a Christian," said the old man solemnly; and Julius rose from his dizzy seat.

"But whence knowest thou this?" said he, after some thought. "Whence knowest thou all this, old man?"

"Colonel Haldenbach," replied the huntsman, "once, in a sudden attack of his frenzy, precipitated me from this cliff, which is the cause of my scarred and disfigured countenance. He afterwards, in the agony of his remorse, confessed all to me; and, among other things, he told me that a dark tradition had assigned to his race the surname of 'Death-brand,' although the Wildecks themselves knew not how that dreadful calamity came to fall upon their ancestral castle. And since that time the colonel has more than once found it convenient, to make people believe that I am the madman who disturbs the castle; a devilish instinct prompts him even to go about in my clothes. But I have thought it well on my part to inform Count Wildeck, and to save my own honor."

"I return, nevertheless, to Castle Finsterborn for this night," said Julius; "direct me, therefore, thither."

"Every one to his own liking," replied the hunter, and led the way.

In the wood they met with servants and huntsmen on horse and foot, with torches in their hands, seeking for Colonel Haldenbach. He had returned before the evening had set in, but had suddenly disappeared again, nobody knew whither; and it was feared that in his fury he had run into the forest. Julius felt too exhausted by the exertions of the day to render any assistance. He therefore proceeded with the old hunter, and they soon reached the now almost empty castle. When he found himself in his dark bed-chamber, lighted only by the dim light of a single taper, and was about to undress himself, he thought he saw in the mirror the figure of his groom standing behind him, and looking deadly pale. "Christopher, what is the matter?" asked he, looking paler than usual himself.

The faithful boy, instead of answering, pointed to a dark corner of the room, where the tapestry, suspended in the ancient fashion from the cornice, appeared to be in motion. Julius seized his sword and turned toward the spot.

"For God's sake, no," whispered Christopher, and held him by the arm; "I believe the madman is behind."

A hoarse laugh and whisper in the fearful corner confirmed the supposition, and Julius thought he could detect these words:

"Ay, ay! here the mad old Death-brand hides lurking for the last Wildeck. Only go to sleep first, my young fellow."

Amazed and overwhelmed with stupefying horror, Julius rushed after his servant, slammed the door behind him, and reaching the court-yard, called immediately for their horses. The old hunter stood by and praised the count's determination. Julius told him where to search for his faithful master, and sprang forward as if on wings. Alas! as he rode past Rosaura's castle, the crazed song of the unhappy maiden fell upon his ear.

### CHAPTER VI.

At Waldho he met a military attendant, who had been sent to call him back as speedily as possible to his quarters. An unforeseen war had broken out between two neighboring states, and it appeared certain that the sovereign would take in the contest; all the regiments, therefore, had orders to hold themselves in readiness to march.

This was balm for Julius' wounded heart.—With far greater joy than he had dared to hope, he rode through the gate of the capital, and surveyed with sparkling looks the cannon and ammunition-wagons just drawn forth from the arsenal, and the soldiers hastening from the armory, with their field-pieces, who, giving vent to their long-suppressed feelings of martial joy, cheered each other on all sides with song and jest.—Julius' spirit, too, soon revived, through the occupation and bustle occasioned by the needful arrangement for his squadron, and the hours flew past like minutes; and yet not so fast but that Rosaura's sad destiny—endured as it seemed for his sake—called up a sorrowful sigh from his loving bosom.

A great court-day was appointed, when the officers of the guards, who were called out to the field, should all be presented once more, before their departure, to the princesses of the reigning house.

The princess Alwina, at other times so cheerful, was very pale and still. Julius imagined that the approaching eventful day was the only cause of this. But in passing him, she said, "Count Wildeck, I have some matters of weighty import on which to speak to you. Attend at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning in my antechamber."

When Julius appeared at the appointed hour, he was immediately admitted. He found the princess in half-suppressed tears. She desired him to be seated opposite to her; and then began to speak in the following manner:

"On that evening at the hermitage I enticed you, Count Wildeck, into a dangerous—nay, a very fearful piece of rillery. I see, from your countenance, that you have learned by your terrible visit to Finsterborn, the origin of the Haldenbach's surname. I trust that no bloody tragedy has again taken place there?"

On hearing the count's calming reply, she breathed deeply, and said, "God be praised!—I was under dreadful apprehensions. You must know," she continued, "that my wonder at Rosaura's strange behaviour that evening induced me to mention the circumstance to my father.—He chid me severely, as well as my brother, for our untimely jesting; and he then laid before us the secret archives of the house of Haldenbach, relating to these events, and we have read with horror the whole history. And, Count Wildeck, it much—very much—concerns you, that you should know the whole from the very foundation."

"Your highness," replied Julius, "I believe I am already fully informed of this whole case of hopeless complicated fate."

"Hopeless, alas!" replied the princess; and the only possibility of deliverance depends upon a condition."

"I know it, your highness; perhaps the impending war may bring this condition to its fulfillment, and too happy shall I reckon myself if, while I shed my blood for my prince and fatherland, I can at the same time free the race of Haldenbach—so inexpressibly dear to me—from that fearful curse."

"Now I see clearly, Count Wildeck, that you do not yet know all. Read; I shall come again presently, and ask for your decision." And laying an old parchment scroll before him, she left him alone.

"By this instrument, we, Conrad of Thiesbach, knight, and Albert of Lahnhoff, gentleman, testify that we have learned the following from the mouth of Sir Wolfram of Haldenbach, at the hour of his death, when he wrestled almost with despair. God be merciful to his poor soul!"

"Sir Wolfram having, in the fury of the chase, met with a deadly fall from the cliff, summoned us, his hunting companions, to come to him, and related to us, with great lamentation and remorse, all that he had formerly perpetrated against the noble house of Wildeck; which caused our very hearts to stand on end with horror."

Here followed the particulars already related of that horrible deed; but at the passage where the dying old man pronounced the malediction upon the race of Haldenbach, it proceeded thus:

"The soothsayer or prophet added yet farther, that if the family of Wildeck should become extinct, without one of them having first married a daughter of the house of Haldenbach, then the fearful spell should retain its power until the last day, whether a Wildeck should survive or not. After this, however, it appeared that the prophet—mindful, probably, of his own situation, so soon to appear before the judgment-seat, and of the saying of his Lord, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged,'—was about to add something consolatory to the race over whom he had pronounced this malediction; but in the mean time his whole mantle became enveloped and pierced through with the fury of the flames which was so horrible to behold, that he, Sir Wolfram, being unable, in the agony of his conscience, longer to endure the sight, hurried away and buried himself in the forest. After a while he returned, but the tumbling walls had long since buried the old man in the flame and ruins, and Sir Wolfram, to his great sorrow, knew nothing of the words of hope which he had uttered."

"Thus we have officially drawn up by the venerable father Lambert, abbot of the monastery of S. Egidius; if peradventure at some future time it may serve to the use or advantage either of the race of Wildeck or that of Haldenbach.—And I, Conrad of Thiesbach, have, as a farther attestation, affixed my seal with my signature; and I, Albert of Lahnhoff, being unable to write have added a cross under my seal. Given at the castle of Thiesbach, on the 25th day of December, in the year of our Lord 1293."

With deep emotion Julius had deciphered the lines of this curiously written document, the spelling as well as the characters of which were to him strange and unusual. It was now as if a voice had called to him direct from the grave of his prophetic ancestor. With high, solemn fortitude, his hands folded in silent prayer, he stood before the parchment.