

"Well, to tell the truth, one when he is in company with you gentlemen, sits like a dunce; one must once in a while say something."

"Say something, Baron? So far as anything that this book contains, that might furnish you with a theme for conversation, you had better content yourself with being a listener. And then, too, alas! people talk so rarely upon such subjects."

"Very well, then one must turn the conversation that way."

"In order to give one's self importance. Isn't it so?"

"Well, yes. You talk as if I ran ever so much risk in all this. I see none. One amuses himself, one reads, one reflects afterwards."

"When one can, my good Baron—and when one can not do so accurately, then one becomes uncertain, lets himself be carried away; gives his assent, loses faith in God, his peace of mind, perhaps his virtue—and all that is a trifle, is it?"

* * * * *

"Fudge! Suppose for the moment that I did become an atheist—what of it? In that case I would send for my priest, who would confute me out of the Bible, and I should become again a Christian."

* * * * *

Here, their talk was interrupted by the entrance of the waiter with wine, &c.

"Dearest friend," began again the Baron, "tell me a story like what you have already narrated—about attacking the enemy—about whirlpools—about fire-spouting mountains—something that makes one tremble. There is nothing in the world that I like to hear about so well as that."

"That proves that you have a heart, Baron." He smiled, "But, in fact, I might have told you a little more. You have probably heard of the Island of Antiparos?"

Upon the Baron's disclaiming any very intimate acquaintance with the Grotto, Willwitz went on to describe, at some length, that wonderful creation of nature. The Baron listened to every word which fell from his lips, with all the intense interest with which, in his childhood, he may have drank in the ghost stories related by his nurse.

"Our path became more and more shelving. At last we came to dark a cavern, through which we could not pass, except in a stooping posture, and by the light of torches. Prepare yourself, now, to hear of a very dangerous enterprise, which I look upon as being far from creditable to me; on the contrary, of which I am quite ashamed. I never look back upon it without a shudder."

The good Baron was more than ready to listen.

He sat with open mouth, and already felt the sensation of fright in his very hair.

"We had made fast at the entrance a cord, by the help of which we let ourselves down into the first cavern, which was certainly frightful enough. But this was nothing to the second one, into which, half lying down, we were obliged to crawl slowly. A man with nerves a very little weaker than mine, would have become dizzy and sick at the bare thought of the fathomless depths which lay at my left, on the very brink of which I was obliged to pass."

The Baron held his hand before his eyes.

"And what think you, my friend? Actually upon the very edge—slippery as glass—of this abyss, and thus extremely dangerous, we placed a ladder, upon which we climbed up a perfectly perpendicular rock, with, I confess, some little anxiety and heart-beating, as you may well suppose."

The Baron sprang to his feet—but immediately sat down again.

"What is the matter with you, Baron?"

"Nothing—Willwitz—nothing—only my weak head. I really felt as if I myself had fallen off. Go on."

"I climbed up, and with now apparently less risk, farther on; and now I believed myself almost safe, when I came to the most perilous point of all; and unless my guide had called out, I should certainly have broken my neck."

Here the Baron held his breath—and all the muscles of his face were in full play.

"We found here a ladder that was so old and rotten that it would have been broken the first moment that a foot rested upon it. We therefore availed ourselves of a new one, which we had brought with us for that purpose. Then we were obliged to trust ourselves again, hanging by a new rope, and after we had slid ourselves along for a season, now upon our stomachs, and now upon our backs, at last, to my great satisfaction, I saw myself in the grotto, to reach which, I had risked so much."

"At last! Now God be thanked. And what did you find in the grotto?"

"As for that, why, it was very pretty."

"But, what was there worth taking away with you?"

"How you speak. Absolutely nothing."

"Absolutely nothing!" (with a tone of astonishment)

"And did you come back safe?"

"I must have; otherwise I should hardly be drinking here, your Burgundy."