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THE WITCH OF OAKDALE; OR, THE WAYS OF PROVIDENCE.

(From the Catholic Telegraph.)

CHAPTER VI.—THE NECROMANCER.

Midnight had passed, and soon the deep-sounding horn of the warden of the tower would announce the first hour of the next day, when there was an uneasy and trembling tapping on the door of a chamber, where the monk was snoring in comfortable repose. He awoke, and sneaking on tiptoe to the door, removed the bolt, and without noise, Sigismund Gassler entered.

"Ah, I see you have turned somnambulist, while in Rabenfels," said the monk, with a grinning smile, "hot blood like yours will never find rest. It is only a pity, that by some magical operation you can't infuse the veins of your host with it. He would soon start for the Orient."

"He is not going there," muttered Knight Gassler, with dejection in his countenance, "that is the reason why I miss my necessary rest. Your plan was good, cunning Jurgen, but it was wrecked most ignominiously on the firm will of the count."

"Slowly, my good friend, slowly," replied the pseudo monk of Costnitz, "have you no eyes? Bart Smoke is within the walls of Rabenfels, and he must help. Promise me the third part of the income of this castle, then return quietly to your bed, enjoy a soft morning slumber, and don't let wild grief spoil your beautiful face."

"You shall have what you ask for," replied the knight, and turned to leave the room.

"Stop!" cried Veit after him, "one moment, Sir Gassler, of your wife, whom you cast away about half a year ago, I have not heard since. I think sorrow has done it work, and I hardly believe that she is among the living now. Your daughter Johanna I have sold to an old gipsy woman. You wanted me to drown her, but when I looked into that innocent angel's face, I could hardly gain courage to send it to a watery grave. The gipsy will raise her, while traveling from place to place, and, perhaps, in future days, she may read and tell the fortunes of her father, who tore her out of the arms of a loving but castaway mother."

"Silence, miserable dog," muttered the knight, who, with tottering steps, was hastening away; his conscience was horrified at the laughter of the monk, haunting him through the corridors of the castle like the demoniac mocking of a spectre.

But Veit Jurgen covered his face with his false beard, threw the cowl over his shoulders, and walked slowly and without noise through the dark corridor to a little side entrance.— Crossing the court-yard, he reached a "little room" near the gate, where the sorcerer of Augsburg had taken quarters. Upon a given signal Bart Smoke opened, and the monk remained with him in silent and secret conclave till the morning dawned. Then he stepped out of the apartment and took a position near the great castle gate, in order to engage in conversation with the count, as soon as he would descend to give orders to his people for the day.

In the meantime the joyful sports of yesterday were renewed in the court-yard. The crusaders liked play and song so well, that they

looked with sad eyes upon the hour, when they would leave this hospitable place. When the count entered, they all greeted him gratefully, and Peter von Jenkendorf, in whose brain the wine of yesterday was yet in operation, ordered his men to commence the "Crusader's Song." But the monk rushed into their midst, and reprimanded them for their inconsiderate behavior; then he blessed the count with the monastic benedictio, and the latter invited the venerable Pater to walk with him under the Linden, while at the gate the necromancer was putting his market into order.

The screeching cries of the magpie soon summoned the inhabitants of the castle to patronize its master and everybody rushed thither, and even the count concluded to look for a few minutes upon the tricks of the magician.

Bart Smoke stood upon a slightly elevated platform, covered with a black cloth, full of cabalistic signs and figures. The donkey sat upon his hind legs, aside of his master; the owl and magpie fluttered upon both of his shoulders, and the ape endeavored to crack a hard walnut. On the ground were scattered skulls, bones, tortoise shells, skeletons of snakes, dried salamanders and numerous other things and instruments, which the necromancer needed for his mystic operations.

After he had performed several illusions and wonderful pieces, at which the staring multitude burst out in tumultuous applause, the necromancer, receiving a slight wink from the monk, turned towards the count of Rabenfels, and asked him to test his art in any way or form he might see fit. The monk whispered into the ear of the knight: "Ask him to make known to you by his art the truth of a circumstance that, so far, is concealed to you, but which is of great importance to the peace of your soul, and most essential to the happy future of your race."

The count liked the proposal and the sorcerer was summoned to answer this question.

At first he cut a very dark grimace and made diverse movements with head, hands and feet, but at last he took his magic wand, and commanding the deepest silence, he passed it hard over the back of the monkey. The shaggy animal commenced to howl piteously, and kept on moaning and whining till a large butterfly fluttered out of its open mouth, sailing towards the high lime-tree. Hardly had the magpie noticed the variegated stranger, when she followed it with a screeching cry and soon disappeared in the dense foliage. The gazing eyes of the lookers on had to wait a long time, ere the tattling bird returned, but at last it appeared with a black egg in its beak. Then she hacked the queer booty to pieces, drew a written piece of paper out of the egg and fluttered with it towards the highly astonished knight, laying it into his hands.

The noble master of Rabenfels was becoming rather uneasy and with pardonable curiosity, inquired for the contents of the slip of paper. "If I could only read it," he said half aloud to himself, and he turned the paper in his hands, "but it is in a foreign tongue."

"I can assist you there," replied the monk, and taking the count by the arm, drew him aside. Bart Smoke's performance was ended, and the attention of the people was now drawn towards a group of minstrels and harp-players.

But in a deep niche in the wall in the most remote place, where no listening ear could penetrate, the monk stood at the side of the count, and translated to him these horrible words of the mysterious paper. "Be upon your guard, Sir Walter of Rabenfels, there is danger threatening the peace of your home and your happy wedlock with the beautiful margravine of Austria. An ungrateful fellow, who has gained the confidence of your heart, works day and night to cast shame and dishonor upon your heart and home. Your young and handsome shield-bearer, Kuno, has an eye upon Walter's beautiful and virtuous spouse. Be warned, Count of Rabenfels, and if you do not take just revenge this very moment, the curse of your grand children will follow you to the grave."

CHAPTER VII.—WALTER JOINS THE CRUSADERS.

The count stood thunderstruck before the monk, who, with hypocritical terror upon his countenance, had dropped the mystic sheet to the ground. "Almighty God," he exclaimed at last, his face covered with the folds of his scarlet cloak, "is it possible that the shame and dishonor of my house should be unknown to me? And my own favorite shield-bearer, could he forget himself so far? It is impossible; it can not be. And yet it may be! Yes, I doubt no longer; when the fellow was lying sick, and Lucinda spent her pity on the ungrateful, and even called the Witch of Oakdale from the Mindel valley, by the aid of her herbs to infuse new life into his weak body. Yes, then the miserable wretch was bold enough to think in his vanity, that the behavior of my noble lady had another motive than

pity; and in the haughtiness and pride of his personal beauty and strength he imagined that he was the equal of the Count of Rabenfels. But, by the eternal God, I yet know how to swing my good sword as well as on the day when I won the first prize at the tournament of Augsburg. Monk, you may call me a cowardly clown, if I fail to revenge the race of my ancestors and descendants. This instant I shall hurry to Lucinda. I will tell her to what a miserable wretch she has given her commiseration, at her feet the low-bred dog shall breathe his last."

With these words the count rushed off, heedful of the warnings of the monk, who called him to stay. But at the head of the stairs he suddenly stopped; his feet would carry him no further. The door of Lucinda's apartment had opened, and his young squire Kuno stepped over the threshold. Frantically the count grasped the hilt of his sword; but he suppressed his wild rage, and with a forced smile he asked his favorite; "Wherefrom and whereto leads your way, Kuno?" The shield-bearer bowed and said: "The noble lady sends me with some good old wine to a sick farmer of Nottershausen. If you have anything else for me to fulfill, I am at your command."

"Before you go, you may saddle my black horse," replied the count. "I intend to ride into the forest to hunt; after that you may go to the room at the gate, to take some soup which is prepared for you. Poor boy, you did not have your breakfast yet."

After these words, Walter, pale and trembling, hurried down the stairs towards the gate-room to give some secret instructions to the necromancer, Bart Smoke. Kuno ran to the stable to fulfill the order of his master, with his usual alacrity, and when the count, with a disturbed mind, mounted the impatient courser, he respectfully bid him the usual hunter's "God speed," and went to the warden's room, without the least suspicion entering his mind, to partake of his breakfast according to the wish of his lord.

Evening was at hand, when the count returned, and the cries of his people rang piteously upon his ear: "Kuno is dead in the warden's apartment!" With dark, clouded face Walter stepped towards the corpse, where he found the ladies of the castle, the monk, and Knight Sigismund. With disturbed eyes the former looked upon the approaching count; but the disguised Veit and Gassler stood some distance off, waiting with the anxiety of fiends what the count would have to say, while gazing upon the victim of his rage. But he, pale as death, slowly approached Lucinda, and pointing towards the dead squire, said with the composure of a despairing mind:

"This is the work of my just vengeance, margravine of Austria! So I will slay every one, who dares to touch my wife, the noblest jewel of my life, Kuno, to whom I entrusted my all, has most shamefully abused my confidence, whether with your consent or not, lady countess, the Omniscient only knows. I could bear it no longer, and Smoke, of Augsburg, had to spice the soup of this boy so sharp, that there will be no danger of his returning to life again."

"Walter, what have you done?" exclaimed Lucinda, her whole frame shuddering with horror, while deadly paleness spread over her beautiful face. "I swear before the high, blue heaven, that the lips of your dead squire never breathed any wrong. Through the agency of a base necromancer, and following the whisperings of a false suspicion, you have committed a horrible and unjust murder."

The countess could support herself no longer, her strength gave way and she fell fainting into the arms of Eliza, who looked with tearful eyes upon her brother. He gazed upon the inanimate form of the young man, his mind tormented with awful doubts.

The monk in the back-ground commenced, with a deep and solemn voice the psalm "Miserere," when, through the half-open window, the magpie of the necromancer fluttered into the room, laid a white egg upon the heart of the dead form, picked it open and brought another slip of paper to the count, and the hastily approaching monk read the following words: "You are deceived, Sir Walter! A bad spirit sent you the black egg; to tempt you! Woe be unto you, if this heeding should come too late! The soul of the innocent youth, whom you murdered in cold blood, will cry for vengeance to a just Judge of the living and the dead; and evil after evil will fall upon your house, till your race is erased from the surface of the earth."

This was too much for the terribly agitated knight; like a maniac he cried with a loud and convulsed voice for Bart Smoke, begging him to find some antidote, to restore his victim to life. "Smoke came," and after a short examination gave the information that, although a spark of life seemed to be still in the veins of the poisoned man, he was positive that no human help could restore him.

"Oh, try all you can," exclaimed the conscience-stricken count. "I promise you a high reward. Yes, I will give you a permanent apartment in my castle, that you may, at your leisure, watch the stars and study the secrets of your art."

Now the pseudo monk knew that a favorable opportunity for his designs had come; and stepping to the count, exclaimed with an encouraging voice:

"Sir, vow at this moment, to take the cross for a holy war in the Orient, if Kuno should be restored! Linger not! God is all merciful. He will accept your promise and hear our fervent prayer!"

In the meantime the countess had recovered from her swoon, and when she heard the words of the monk, herself admonished her husband in a beseeching tone:

"What yesterday filled my heart with pain and sorrow, I now advise you to do, my beloved husband. Your hasty deed, which you now repent, needs expiation. In the name of God, you may wander to Palestine!"

The count was undecided for a few minutes, then he raised his right arm toward heaven, and exclaimed, with a slow and solemn voice: "I will leave my all behind to take the red cross."

Bart Smoke soon had an antidote prepared, and he poured it between the pale lips of the inanimate form. "Now he needs rest," said the magician to all present, begging them to leave the room, "for the poor fellow would deem it strange if he should see so many faces around him. He shall never know what happened to him within the last few hours, so that he may not lose any confidence in his master. On the morrow I will return him to you, alive and healthy."

Bart Smoke had kept his word. The count breathed easier when on the next morning, he again greeted his trusty squire.

"Kuno," he said, "I have promised a pilgrimage to the Orient. In the course of very few days we shall start thither. In the far off land you shall be my body-guard; and by the red cross, I have sworn allegiance to, I promise to protect you, even as you will protect me."

Kuno felt himself highly honored by the confidence his master bestowed upon him, and with youthful joy he hastened to make preparations for a speedy journey. The crusaders were wild and full of spirit and enthusiasm, now, that Count Walter of Rabenfels had promised to join them and be their chief.

In the family apartment of Rabenfels all was silent and sorrowful. Lucinda wept scalding tears, leaning on the arm of her husband, who stood before her, dressed in blue mail, ready for immediate departure. "Dear, beloved Walter, may the Almighty protect you on your dangerous journey, and in the perils of the raging battle. Do not expose yourself needlessly to the weapons of the enemy. Think of your child, of Eliza and me, your loving wife," sobbed Lucinda, while she drew the child forward to receive the last blessing of the parting father. Little Otto climed to his father's knee, and patting his cheeks, endeavored to cheer the solemn features of the count.

This brought even a smile to his mother's face, and she whispered: "If Otto grows to be great and strong enough to ride a war-horse, he shall also go to a strange land;" and the boy nodded very joyfully at the words of his mother. But Walter kissed, at least a dozen times, the brow, cheeks and lips of his darling son, and said: "Lucinda, mark the day, when our boy kills the first wild boar in the forest of Nottershausen."

A deep silence reigned for a few minutes, when Lucinda took a scarf out of a wardrobe and said, with deep emotion: "Walter, do you recognize this first token of our love? At the tournament of Prague, where I saw you for the first time, and where you gained the first prize, this scarf was offered to you by the blushing Lucinda as a keepsake. The golden knitting was done by my own hands. Carry this scarf from this hour till you return to the circle of your family. My blessing rests upon it and may it prove to you a talisman, whose unseen power shall protect you from all harm, and bear you remembrance of her, who in the far off home sheds silent tears and thinks of you by day and by night."

With these words she put the scarf around the count's breast and shoulders, and when she had tied it, she whispered: "May your love prove as firm as this knot. Walter, beloved husband, I wish you a happy, speedy journey! May heaven be your guide."

Pressing a kiss upon the pale lips of his true and loving wife, the count stepped towards knight Sigismund, and grasping his hand, said: "Friend Gassler, you, whom misfortune keeps away from home, wife and child, I leave you here as protector of my home and family. How you have to honor a lady's mind and a woman's virtue, it is not necessary to explain to you. A good German knight knows this as

well as the monk his psalms. Teach my son everything to strengthen his body, and what more he needs, to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors; Lady Lucinda will have good care, that he learns everything in the school of Ursberg, what he must know to become a good member of society."

Sigismund Gassler seemed to be deeply moved at these signs of confidence and friendship the count gave him. "Noble Walter," he exclaimed, "I swear by the honor of a knight, by all that is good, that I will shield and protect those you have left in my care, and return them to you as pure and safe, as I received them from your hands."

"Do you hear the horn of the warden," commenced the monk, who had entered the apartment, "the horses are neighing impatiently in the court-yard. The crusaders are moving over the draw-bridge, and your warriors and shield-bearers are anxiously awaiting your appearance. A long leave-taking only increases pain."

Walter pressed a last fervent kiss upon the lips of wife, sister and child, then hurried down the long stairs to mount his spirited war-horse; but Lucinda, Eliza and Otto ascended to the room of the warden in the tower to bid the count a last good-bye.

When the monk passed knight Sigismund at the castle-gate, he muttered in a low voice, "Sir knight, I have kept my promise, and now it your turn. You are now master of Rabenfels. Play your cards well and be certain of your game. Veit Jurgen, of Costnitz, will soon return to claim his reward."

At these he laughed into his long beard, pressed the hand of the knight, bade him farewell and quickly mounted his donkey to reach the crusaders, while Gassler returned and the castellan, with a heavy, depressed heart, bolted the gates of the castle.

CHAPTER VIII.—THE WITCH AT RABENFELS.

Since the departure of Count Walter, the former joyous and happy life had changed.— During the first few days, Lady Lucinda, with her son Otto and sister Eliza, kept themselves within the inner apartments of the castle.

Even the castellan, with the few soldiers which the count had left behind as garrison, did not feel very easy within the walls of Rabenfels, where they had passed such happy, joyful days. Low-spirited and dejected, they would fill stomach and head with old Rhine-wine from the count's cellar. And then, when the old castellan found himself in a condition, where the tongue willingly says, what in a state of sobriety it would keep secret, he cursed the day on which Walter left the castle, and said to his companions, who, with silent nods, affirmed his imprecations: "I cannot understand the actions of our new master.— Towards the servants he is hard and rough, while in presence of the ladies he is the refined and attentive knight; and what will this cunningness bring but evil and misfortune. I fear Sigismund Gassler will most basely abuse the confidence which Count Walter bestowed upon him at his departure. And again, when I look into the wild face of the necromancer, whom Count Walter so hastily allowed an abode in this castle, I involuntarily cross my breast, praying God to preserve us from all evil."

The castellan had a good deal of common sense and knew the condition of affairs pretty well, from the first day after the departure of the count.

Sigismund Gassler treated the servants of the castle like slaves and most unjustly would he inform the noble lady, what a bad set the servants were, and what misdeeds they were committing as soon as she would turn her face.

But when he could sneak out of her presence a while, hunting in the forest, his behavior was licentious and insolent, and not such as was fit the bearing of a knight.

Bart Smoke seemed to have become his most intimate friend. Very often was the knight seen ascending a flight of narrow, winding steps that landed in the apartment of the necromancer. There he would remain for hours, and the people did not know what to think of it. Only once the castellan gathered courage enough to follow him noiselessly, and looking through the key-hole, he afterwards solemnly affirmed, that he had seen how the magician was preparing with his own hands a liquid, and handed it to Gassler; but when he heard the words of the bad knight: "Either surrender to my will or die," he ran terrified down the stairs as if chased by an evil spirit.— Wiping the perspiration from his burning brow, he went to thinking upon the easiest and quickest method of communicating the revelation to his noble and beloved mistress.

But soon Sigismund Gassler made his appearance in the court-yard, and ordered the castellan, who had scarcely recovered from his fright, to saddle the horses and with a few men he went to hunt in the neighboring forests.

After several days of incessant rain a cheer-