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

(From the Catholic Telegraph.)

CHAPTER III.—DEEP PLOTTING.

The loud sounds of an approaching bugle rang suddenly from the highway, and a few minutes afterwards it could evidently be perceived, that the persons causing these blasts had left the highroad and were advancing through a set of bushes by a path leading along the river towards the forge. The honest Hans was terrified and gave way to his dejection by whispering into the ear of his faithful spouse:

"When the poor goatherd of Barenbach returned to you your lost lamb this morning, you should not have let him off without giving him something for his honesty and trouble.— See you, now, we have misfortune till midnight. What may this new noise bring to our house?"

Then he hastened towards the entry and listened through the half opened door, who were advancing at such a late hour of night. But soon he recovered from his surprise, for a then favorite crusading song, bursting out of many mouths, greeted his ears.

Meanwhile a crowd of men on foot and horse entered, and soon filled the great open space in front of Netter's house. Torches blazed here and there, disclosing the strangely formed groups of men and a dark view of the black firs of Ursberg in the back ground.— Soon a large fire burst up under the great lime-tree and everybody in the house had a fair chance to view this crowd of crusaders.

At several places, soldiers sat down on the ground to partake of some cold food they had carried in their knapsacks. Many attended to and were feeding their hungry horses, whilst others, tired with the day's march, laid down to rest, covered with nothing to keep the damp mist off, but their arched shields. But most of them grouped around a young minstrel, who for a small compensation had joined the crowd, and endeavored, now and then, with sweet songs of love and fiery war-hymns, to keep up the spirit of these crusading wanderers and warriors.

Hans Netter, his wife and servants, did all in their power to entertain and refresh these uninvited guests with everything their kitchen could afford.

Sigismund Gassler also left the house, and drawing his brimmed hat as far as possible over his face, stood with crossed arms against a tree and watched with a contemptible smile the various movements of the crowd.

While he thus gazed upon the phantastic groups before him, there emerged from among the throng a grey-bearded monk, apparently the leader, and approaching, tapped the astonished knight on the arm, giving him a sign to follow him into a clump of bushes.

When they had walked about twenty paces from the scene, the monk turned around, and the black cowl fell from his shoulders, and removing the false beard, Sigismund was joyfully surprised to recognize in the pseudo monk his old confederate Jurgen, generally known by the name of Fish-Veit of Costnitz. The knight felt inclined to express his surprise and delight in loud words, but the cunning Jurgen pointed with his hand towards the motley crew at the fire, and said in an undertone:

"Hush, we must not betray ourselves.— They do not know my real name."

"Ah, is that it, old fellow?" returned Sigismund, "but what means all this?"

"Ha, ha," said Jurgen with a low, chuckling laugh, "don't I know how to manage little affairs like this, Sir Knight? I am sure you will be satisfied the way I arranged everything! Your wish to get this Count Walter von Rabenfels out of the way, shall be fulfilled, and my head shall be responsible for it. But then, after I have fulfilled everything according to agreement, I expect that you will give me a handsome reward, as you have promised me, upon your honor as a knight, more than a dozen times. But then hear of my adventurous plan, and how I have carried it through so far." He advanced very close to the knight, and continued: "After the last conversation with you, Sir Knight, when you openly confessed to me the burning passion you entertained toward the beautiful woman at Rabenfels, and after I had sworn to assist you, I returned to Costnitz, brooding and thinking day and night over a successful plan. While there, one morning, I visited our Fisher's inn, and whom should I meet but my old friend and confederate, Peter of Jenkendorf. Through his thoughtlessness he had become a poor devil and was just on the point of offering his services to the City of Ulm."

"Why," said he to me, "the men of Ulm, who are beleaguered so disgracefully, need every brave man's arm."

"Ah, bosh," I quickly returned, "my old friend Peter, you must take the red cross. In Palestine you can gain honor and money in abundance, and besides this you can, while in the midst of battle with the Saracens, atone for all the sins and crimes you committed in your youth, and you will be certain of reaching a high position in heaven." These words touched the ignorant Peter to the very heart, and while he cried like a child, he promised to join me on the instant. The next day we were on the road to Augsburg. There I am well acquainted with a neomancer, whose name is Bartholomew Smoke. He advised me to don the cowl of a monk. In this mask I would find thousands of adherers. He pasted a false beard on my face, and besmearcd my mouth, cheeks, and forehead with a brown fluid, so that even my mother wouldn't have recognized me. And so I commenced to preach the cross, and Peter of Jenkendorf, at my side, swung his shining javelin with an inspiring attitude that was joyful to behold. "To the cross, to the red cross!" was echoed everywhere. Hardly four weeks have passed and there you see a powerful troop of inspired men, with the red cross on their breast."

"This is all right enough," returned Knight Gassler, "but when will I reach my so patiently waited for object?"

"Everything in good time," quickly interrupted Veit, "we must not hurry ourselves, but let me finish it," and he threw his cowl over his shoulders again, and put the beard to his face. "Bartholomew Smoke has provided me with false documents, such as letters from the Pope, proclamations to counts and knights in Swabia, and friendly invitations from the bishop of Augsburg to take the red cross.— To-morrow we will reach Rabenfels. Ha, ha, ha, you will see me there, and make the acquaintance of the eloquent Veit Jurgen of Costnitz. I swear by my false beard, that before twenty-four hours have passed, Count Walter will take the red cross and join the crusaders. Till then, farewell, Sir Knight, and remember well the promised reward," and a few minutes afterwards the pseudo monk had joined the crowd at the fire in the yard of Netter's house.

Slowly and by a different route, Sigismund Gassler returned, his black beard rejoicing at his near triumph. But when he neared the house and beheld the spot where he had seen the old witch disappear in the darkness; when he thought of the bitter truths she had told him in presence of others; his rejoicing soon vanished, and when he saw that his restless conscience would find no peace while in the abode of Hans Netter, he gave orders for immediate departure.

Netter's heart became glad, when the knight and the hunting party had left. "The crusaders," he said to his wife, "we will gladly allow to stay over night. But, as long as that vagabond Gassler was here, a cold shudder kept running over me. I wonder what his feelings are since old Gertrude told him such awful truths." And after he had received a blessing from the apparently venerable monk at the fire, he went to his bed quietly and contented.

CHAPTER IV.—RABENFELS CASTLE.

Rabenfels was considered one of the noblest and finest castles in the country; partly on account of its great strength, and partly on account of the beautiful view that could be had from its summit; in any direction the eye might gaze. From a high eminence, robed

with green, fragrant bushes, it looked up stream like a sentinel, upon hill and dale, forest and villages, convents and castles, away to the snow-covered Alps; while on the other side the eye could gain a free view to the very deepest recesses of a valley at the bottom of which the silvery stream, Wertach, wound its way. This valley was flanked by stupendous mountains, the sides of which were intersected by numerous and well wooded ravines. It was a romantic and sublime sight, and one to inspire poet or painter.

It was early morning. The higher hills were yet shrouded in mist, while the bosom of the valley was flooded with a glowing light, not very frequent in a climate like that of Southern Germany. Thin wreaths of vapor curled slowly from the river, up the mountain side; gradually revealing to the gazing eye the rich foliage of the woods, sparkling with diamond-like dew drops. The fresh morning air came loaded with the perfume of dale and forest, in whose green branches thousands and thousands of birds were heard praising their Creator, in the most musical chimes.

The solid and high walls of the castle were surrounded by a deep ditch, to guard against hostile attacks. A high watch-tower, at the foot of which was the heavy bolted gate and the iron cased drawbridge, and from whose port holes any threatening knight might be successfully repelled, with the aid of arrow, lance and burning pitch, completed the fame of this castle as impregnable. In the rear of the castle was a beautiful garden, and wherever the eye wandered it met with fruit trees and fragrant rose bushes, richly watered by the crystal springs of the great castle-well.

But the greatest fame Rabenfels possessed in its inhabitants, Count Walter was universally known as the flower of chivalry, and master in the use of arms. At every tournament, either in Augsburg or Cologne, he was sure to gain the first prize. But it was the noble qualities of his heart, his friendly and disinterested bearing toward high and low; the leniency, with which he ruled over his bondmen and vassals, and the strict adherence to the faith of his ancestors, who had all distinguished themselves as brave and Christian knights, that won for him the respect and love of all who knew him.

The count's spouse, Lucinda, a born margravine of Austria, was, in regard to personal beauty and noble qualities of heart and spirit, fully the equal of her husband; and whoever had the good fortune of making the acquaintance of this graceful woman could not help but to meet her always with respect and esteem. The count loved her with the truest and most sincere affection of a husband, and God had favored this happy pair with a dear pledge of conjugal love. A three year old boy, Otto, was the joy of his parents and the whole household. The good mother and Eliza, the excellent sister of the count, were the faithful nurses of the child; and under their anxious care he reached his third year. The friendly morning sun of the approaching autumn brought the so heartily wished for cradle-feast.

Yet the boy slumbered sweetly in his little snow-white bed. A mother's love smiled at his side, and Eliza—while humming the air of a beautiful cradle song—out of the late, fragrant flowers of summer, wound a wreath around the resting place of the sleeping child. A little distance off stood Count Walter, a happy father, parental joy beaming upon his noble face. A holy feeling hovered invisibly, like a protecting angel, over this beautiful group; and a silent, but fervent, prayer of thanks rose up to the kind Father of the human race.

The child awoke, and smiling sweetly, it raised itself, folded its little hands, and casting its gaze towards heaven, prayed for the first time: "Our Father who art in Heaven!"

The count did not know what was happening to him. The surprise had touched his very heart. He looked at his wife, who, with a countenance beaming with love and joy, embraced him. Offering to the good sister his hand, he exclaimed, with manly inspiration: "This is the most beautiful, and the happiest day of my life."

And when the child finished its little prayer: "But deliver us from evil;" the joy of the father's heart knew no bounds. Tears of rapture flowed down his cheeks, and taking the boy in his arms, he kissed and caressed him, pressed him to his heart, and exclaimed: "Yes, may the Almighty protect thee, my dear child, from all evil, and misfortune, and that greatest of evils, from sin. The Lord be praised for the love and mercy He has shown us; and we, thy parents, here solemnly promise that we will educate thee for a good member of society, and an honor to the good name of your house and ancestors."

In the meantime the ringing tones of several musical instruments were heard in the courtyard. The count had concluded that the cradle-feast of his only child should be celebrated by

all his bondmen and soldiers, and the morning had hardly dawned when crowds of people, from the valley, clad in festive attire, filled the highway leading to the castle.

When the villagers rushed through the gate the wild knight, Sigismund Gassler, succeeded in entering over the draw-bridge, unperceived. Then he took one of the minstrels aside, and offered him a rich reward if he would sing a new, sweet cradle song. The minstrel consented, and throwing a festive cloak over his shoulders, the knight ordered him to proceed to the family apartments of the count.

Soon the singer had touched his lute, and with a clear, ringing voice he described in a charming and melodious song, the festivities of the day, praising the good qualities of child and parents, in most glowing terms and concluded by wishing the young heir a long and happy life, and hoped that he would follow in the footsteps of his noble parent.

During the song, knight Sigismund had entered the apartment. The count hastened to him, and folding him to his breast, with true friendship, exclaimed:

"The song of the minstrel, with which you, good Sigismund, intend to heighten this festival, did not give the parents less joy than surprise; and Count Walter, for such well meant congratulations, must remain your debtor.— And I do not know how to compensate you for this token of friendship, but by inviting you to remain in Rabenfels right long, and to consider it your own."

"I know your generosity," returned he of Ulm, with apparent sincerity; "and therefore took the liberty to make use of it. Otherwise I have to crave pardon for not passing last night under your hospitable roof. Where distress calls my assistance, all other considerations to fall to the background. Besides this I was compelled to walk miles before I found a minstrel who, in my estimation, would be able to heighten the beauty of this high family feast."

After these words he advanced toward the ladies of the house, and bowing deeply, he handed the beautiful Countess Lucinda a bouquet of roses, with the following words:

"Noble lady, I found this last rose, beautiful and fragrant as one of the early hours of summer, and venture to present it to you, that you may accept it as a gift for the first rose of your conjugal love. And from whom would it be more welcome to the beautiful child than from the hands of a loving mother?"

"Receive my heartfelt thanks, Sir Knight," returned Lucinda, with womanly grace, as she received the nosegay out of the hands of the knight, and fastened it smilingly to the dress of little Otto. "And," she continued, "how heartily do I wish that your good wife Edeltrudis with her charming little daughter, Johanna, could be witnesses of this happy day, and rejoice in our society."

"Yes," interrupted Eliza, "would we not be happy together; but then, what a long way it is from here to Strassburg, where she sojourns with her child, at the house of a cousin; to strengthen in the pure air of the Rhine, the weak health of the darling child; and I am afraid that your wish to see your loved ones soon in our midst, will not be fulfilled."

Sigismund turned pale at these words, and cast his eyes to the ground in confusion. Then he commenced to play with the hilt of his sword, so as not to show the worm that again commenced to gnaw his heart.

But he returned, with an apparently painful effort:

"As soon as I hear of the good results of this journey to Strassburg, I may well thank God. But, alas, I feel a presentiment of anxiety and anguish in my heart that my child will be a victim of its weakness; and then should the maiden remain behind in the churchyard of Strassburg, grief and sorrow for the lost child would make the loving mother follow, and the unfortunate Gassler would never see either of them again, while in this world."

He dropped a tear, and with a dejected expression on his features, turned to go, but the count consoled him, and earnestly admonished his wife and sister to avoid, in future, mentioning any subject that might bring sorrow and painful remembrances to the heart of the knight; and proposed to join for an hour the merry throng of villagers and soldiers, huntsmen and shepherds, minstrels and musicians, who were all enjoying themselves to the best of their ability.

CHAPTER V.—GASSLER AND THE PSEUDO MONK.

In the courtyard everybody was full of life and spirit. There were friendly encounters for a fine lance. Hunters were vying to shoot with their arrows a coin of silver from the beak of an eagle, fastened to a high pole; while others tried their strength in wrestling. But the largest throng of the villagers moved towards the castle gate, where a neomancer with a donkey was just entering. The lazy animal endeavored to pass the castle, but the artist seeing the large and lively crowd, pro-

duced himself a good harvest, and dragged master Long-ear over the drawbridge into the castle.

The magician was of a long and meagre stature, with long white hair, and a beard of the same color, flowing down his breast. On his head he had a turban, in the oriental fashion; over his shoulders hung a long, black cloak, reaching down to the ground, and a fiery red girdle encircled his waist. An ugly monkey covered on the back of the donkey, and a tame, talkative magpie fluttered over the group, sitting at one time on the brim of his master's hat, while again to the horror of all present it would, with a screeching cry, dash into the very centre of the lookers-on and steal out of their hands pieces of cake and fruit.— The magician installed himself with his animals and apparatus near the castle gate, and whenever he became tired of the staring multitude, he would soon scatter them by calling his black poodle-dog.

The neomancer had hardly been fifteen minutes within Rabenfels when suddenly the horn of the warden of the tower was heard.— The castellan rushed to the count, informing him that a large troop of armed men could be seen advancing toward the castle; and that it was hard to tell whether their intentions were friendly or of a hostile nature. The count gave instant orders to hoist up the draw-bridge, and to close the heavy door firmly. A herald ascended the crest of the wall, and thrusting a powerful lance into the ground, awaited with a lofty and proud mien the arrival of the strangers.

But soon they perceived what important reason brought hither this great throng of armed men; the count ordered the gate to be opened and gave the warden a sign to lower the heavy bridge. The crusaders had started from Netter's forge at early dawn, and were now, with loud cheers, entering the courtyard. Master Hans had given them one of his men as a guide. Count Walter welcomed his unexpected guests in the most friendly manner; inviting them to partake of the feast and its joys, and, if convenient, to make the castle their resting place for a few days.

The venerable monk now stepped forth, and blessing with raised hands the inhabitants of the castle, broke out in the following solemn harangue:

"May the hand of an Almighty God protect this house from all evil and misfortune; and may he furthermore illumine the noble count's heart to offer, with the red cross upon his breast, his strong arm and sword to the holy cause. Rise, Knight Walter, to join these holy warriors. By the key of the great apostle, Peter, we will not eat or drink till you promise to be our chieftain. You, men of this sacred pilgrimage, pray with me that the Almighty may enlighten his heart!"

But, instead of praying, Peter von Jenkendorf grasped his lance, and swinging it enthusiastically, exclaimed:

"Hullo! long life to the noble Count Walter, of Rabenfels; the flower of chivalry, and Strabia's most celebrated hero, who will lead us, crowned with victory, to the walls of Jerusalem;" and the whole body of crusaders joined in the vivats of the long Peter.

But the count soon appeased their cries, and said, that in an important case like this, it would take him, at least, a few days' consideration before he could give his consent. In the meantime they might make themselves comfortable, enjoy the festivities and partake of every thing his kitchen was able to offer. The count did not need to make this proposal twice. The wandering crusaders soon joined the villagers and hunters; and their joyous shouts found a deep echo in the neighboring hills and forests.

The count, with his family and Knight Gassler returned by the winding stairs towards the inner rooms of the castle, after he had invited the venerable monk to follow. The latter stepped quickly towards the neomancer at the gate, and greeting him, whispered into his ear:

"Welcome, Bart. Smoke, within the walls of Rabenfels. I suppose you know the Fish Veit of Costnitz? Be ready, I may need you."

The artist nodded consent, and the monk hurried after the count, to the warm hearthstone.

Here the time passed quickly by, under the influence of the minstrel's lute and song, and the ringing of glasses filled with the sparkling Rhine-wine, till midnight was close at hand; when again the pseudo monk commenced to persuade the count to take the red-cross. He exhibited all his false documents, and laid particular stress upon a forged letter from Bishop Conrad, of Augsburg, who wrote to Count Walter von Rabenfels in the following strain: "We learn with the deepest joy, how generously you have, with true Christian spirit, donated large estates to the monastery of Ursberg, and the convent of Odilstatten." But, to crown all your deeds, we would, at the bid-