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

(From the Catholic Telegraph.) CHAPTER XX—THE PILGRIM AND THE NUN. Not a year had passed since the liberation of Count Walter and his page. Invigorated by new hopes and supported by Kuno and Jenken dorf, who protected him wherever it became necessary with sword and lance, he started on his journey home. Without being obliged to fight their way through any extraordinary dangers and adventures, they soon reached a swarm of returning crusaders. Then a good ship brought them safely across the Mediterranean Sea and the green and beautiful coast of sunny France soon greeted their longing eyes. Having every insignia of his rank secreted beneath the wide flowing garb of a pilgrim, the count crossed the mountain chains of the Helvetian Alps, and when Suabia's beautiful plains spread out before his ardent gaze, he knelt down, thanking the Omnipotent for this great favour of restoring him to his native land, in a loud and fervent prayer. Then he begged the Almighty, after this long time of absence, and after having carried him safely through all perils and dangers, to let him greet again his beloved folks at home and in their circle to offer an universal prayer of thanks. The twilight of an early spring morning was still enshrouding the high spires of the convent of St. Gallen, when the merry chiming of its bells, inviting the peasants and inhabitants of the convent, to devotional prayers and Mass, rang clear and far through the deep valley. And not many minutes had passed before crowds of people, plainly but cleanly and neatly dressed, hurried through the fresh morning air from all directions to the great cloister church, to offer to the Lord their devotions for the day, to thank him fervently for every grace, and to call down anew his further favors and protection. Now the convent door opens, and the pious recluses, dressed in deep black, their faces hid by a thick veil, come from their cells and enter slowly and while praying their morning devotion, the choir of the church. But from one cell sorrowful sobs and a low tearful prayer were to be heard. This prayer of holy longing and deep mourning came from the heart of the former countess Lucinda. The church bells ceased their ringing and with trembling steps Sister Lucinda walked from her cell to the church and when the circle of sisters had taken her in their midst, the great organ commenced its gloomy and solemn accompaniment to a deep and grave choral song. In the meantime a strange pilgrim, garbed in a long black gown, had walked to the closed church door. Two men, dressed in mail and decorated with the red cross, who appeared to be his companions, erected a small booth, and in a quarter of an hour they had spread out a large collection of relics and valuables from the holy land, offering these articles for sale to the people as they approached or passed the church. Deeper still sounded the mournful music of the organ, more solemn became the voices; as the deep psalms of mourning rang sadly through the arched space of the church. Then followed the closing hymn of the reverend cloister fathers, "Requiem eternam," and all became silent as the grave. "What mournful service is this?" asked the pilgrim behind his booth of relics of the sacristan, as the latter opened the door of the church. And he returned:

"It was the Requiem Mass held for the soul and memory of the noble count Walter of Rabenfels. Long years ago he joined in the holy war against the infidels in Palestine. But by an accident he was killed before he could leave this country, and now the lady of the deceased, the pious and devout recluse, Sister Lucinda, whom you will see pass here in a few minutes, has founded this yearly Requiem Mass for the salvation of the soul of her beloved husband." Hardly had the sacristan uttered these words when he walked hurriedly away and was soon lost among the mass of people that came from the church. But the pilgrim trembled at this exciting news, and pressing back his deep emotion, elevated his gaze to the heavens above, and leaving the booth to his companions, took a position close to the church door. The crowd had left the church and many stopped at the place where the two armed men sold many a valuable relic. But the pilgrim kept his place at the door, his trembling eyes closely watching every one leaving the church. Now the recluses and sisters leave the church. Inquisitively and even insolently the pilgrim gazes under the veil of every passing sister, going so far as to lift here or there a veil as if by accident, but the one he searched for was not among them. More tumultuously beat his heart and with a dejected air he was about to turn away, when the last of the recluses, sobbing and with her eyes cast to the ground, stepped across the threshold of the church. Nearly despairing, the pilgrim dared to raise the veil from the face of the woman dressed in black. One gaze, and a cry of deadly terror broke from her lips! At that moment the black robe of the stranger fell upon the ground, the pilgrim's staff dropped out of his hand, and the broad-brimmed hat from his head. "Lucinda," exclaimed the pilgrim, and folding her in his arms pressed a fervent kiss upon her pale lips. "Walter, my Walter," was the reply, and fainting she lay in the arms of her beloved husband. Count Walter took the pale wife, who had sunk down in joyous surprise in his arms, and carried her, while the multitude broke out in joyful exclamations and cheers, into the little cell near the great church. At last he was able, by the well known tone of his voice and the sweet words of a hearty welcome, to recall her to consciousness. Only now the long contained tears commenced to pour down upon his mailed breast, at this unexpected meeting, and then both knelt down in fervent prayer to thank God, in the ecstasy of their joy for this great boon of meeting each other again in the vale of sorrows and misfortunes. But soon this hour of joyful greeting became saddened by Lucinda's recital of the horrible events that had transpired since the count, her husband, had bid farewell to his home and family. Dark clouded became the brow of Count Walter as he listened to the awful tale. With painful words Lucinda described the terrible conflagration and total destruction of Rabenfels castle; the disappearance of their only child, Otto, and the positive death of the beloved sister, Eliza among the ruins. The behaviour of Gassler, whom the count had left as guardian at Rabenfels, she endeavored, with all possible Christian charity, to represent in as mild a light as possible, and concluded with the belief that with the appearance of Bart Smoke misfortune had entered into Rabenfels castle, and that from that day sorrows had commenced. "Dear Walter," she whispered, with a bashful and winning smile, "who knows but our child has grown to become a valiant knight; following worthily in the footsteps of his illustrious father and ancestors. Perhaps he has gained distinction ere now, in the tournament, or as God only knows, in the same holy war you have been engaged in for such a long number of years. Now that I have you again, my dear Walter, new and ardent hopes have entered my breast that further joys with other surprises in this world." "We will hope for the best," replied the count, his downcast spirits reviving under the gentle influence of these inspiring words: "but I can not conceive how the Fish Veit of Costnitz gained possession of my scarf, as I never took it from my body, but I think he must have stolen it while I was asleep. And Knight Gassler surely deserves my just anger for abusing so basely this sign to confirm the awful news of my death, in the heart of my faithful Lucinda. And," he continued, gazing with a vacant eye upon the floor, "if the flight of the pseudo monk from Strassburg with the stolen scarf and the false news of my death have any connection, I am nearly forced to believe that a base conspiracy against me has been in existence, the bad consequences of which, thank God, have been mercifully averted from us to some extent." Then he related his imprisonment of so many long years, of the horrible treatment received

there; of his utter hopelessness of ever regaining freedom, and his despair of ever beholding his loved ones at home again, and of his sudden and most wonderful rescue, by an unknown knight. Again there flowed tears of joy and thanks to the God of mercy. Although Lucinda had learned to love her lonely cell in her hours of sadness, still, when this time of conjugal happiness returned, she gladly, and with the utmost joy bid it farewell to go with her beloved husband back to the felicity of a homely hearth, to which heaven in its mercy had recalled her. Hardly had Count Walter and his spouse, Kuno and Jenkendorf arrived at the ruins of Rabenfels; hardly had their advent become known when inhabitants of the Mündel Schmutter and Wertach Valleys crowded to meet them; and the wood crowned hills and mountains re-echoed the joyous shouts of hearty greeting.—The prior of the Monastery of Ursberg surrendered to the count his vast possessions, which the former had very conscientiously administered during the latter's absence. Hans Netter and his men from the forge, and thousands of villagers, offered readily their services to rebuild immediately the castle of Rabenfels. As if by magic there arose, during the same summer, a lofty building upon the desolate ruins, and soon a new and beautiful castle, with its high walls and many towers, gazed proudly into the valley. CHAPTER XXI.—THE HARPER AND HIS CHILD. The sun was setting in the west and the twilight of the approaching evening was casting its shadows upon the earth, when an old man stepped from the dark arches of the fir. Upon his shoulders he carried an old harp. "God be thanked," he exclaimed, with a voice trembling with joy, while he turned around toward a female figure that was following, with anxious steps, closely upon his heels. "The Lord be praised, Johanna! He has heard our prayer. We need not, as yesterday, seek repose in the deep ravines of yonder black and gloomy forest. I know this region which we have entered upon. See, near the foot of the wood-crowned hill gleams forth the high roofing of a house. Do you hear the loud ringing of the iron hammer? It is the forge of the honest Hans Netter; a man whom I knew in former times; times that brought shame and disgrace upon me. We will seek shelter for the following night at Netter's abode. He is too charitable to deny us the favor. Will he recognize me? No, time has altered my features; this head of sorrow, this face full of the wrinkles of the manifold gnawing of conscience and suffering, will obliterate every possible spark of recognition. And I prefer it thus, till I have found what will be your future welfare, Johanna." The female, following close behind the old man, did not reply, but with a tearful sigh continued her journey, as a tender lamb, adhering close to her conductor, wherever he might lead her. But from the forge rang loud and long the songs of Netter's men, accompanied by the regular strokes of the hammer. The song had not ceased when the old wanderer and his veiled companion reached the threshold of Netter's house. When the hospitable Hans espied the stranger in front of his door, he hurried to meet him, and invited him to enter immediately the warm room, where Elizabeth had just prepared the good and substantial supper. But the wanderer insisted upon earning his lodgings, as he was wont to do; and loosening the harp from his shoulder he put it in order and motioned his timid companion to do the same with her lute. Beautiful and sweet rang the melodious strains from the two instruments, and Elsie and the men approached to listen to their harmonious sounds. "You have pleased me and my people very much with your sweet music," said Netter, when the wanderers had ceased; "now please to enter immediately and make yourselves easy in my home." And Elizabeth took Johanna by the arm and conducted her quickly into the room. "O, my God," she exclaimed, "how the poor thing trembles with the cold. Your tender limbs are not strong enough to withstand as bravely as ourselves, the coarse autumn wind that whistles sharp and keen through the firs. I pity you from my heart, dear child! But our warm hearth and a bowl of nourishing soup for supper shall soon make you forget the harsh treatment which you received at the hands of the autumn air." And the good hearted Elsie set about to prepare them a good luncheon; to the old man she gave also a glass of good old apple wine, but to the maiden a bowl of sweet milk. Then she prepared some good soup, and a rich savory stake, which latter appeared to suit the harper especially. During supper time, while sitting around the oaken table, much news from either side was communicated, and the sudden and happy return of Count Walter of Rabenfels, who had discovered and found in the person of a nun his noble and long-lost

wife received especial attention, and became the leading topic of their conversation. "You have arrived at an opportune moment," said Hans Netter, addressing his guests. "On St. Michael's day, which we celebrate a week from to-day, a banquet will be given by the count, in his newly erected castle, in honor of his happy return. Minstrels, harpers and singers will be especially welcome. You shall help to add to the splendour and beauty of the feast, my dear people; and if it pleases you, I invite you, herewith, to remain, in the meantime, under my roof, and to partake of Hans Netter's hospitality. And when the time arrives, at the appointed hour we will go together through hill and dale to Rabenfels' Castle." The earnest and melancholy face of the old harper apparently brightened up; a sign that his heart had been filled with joy by the speech of his host, or that a new and sweet hope had entered his soul. Readily he accepted the invitation of the hospitable Hans and turning to the girl he said: "Do not be so despondent, Johanna, brighter days await you. Your lot will not always be such as it is now. I feel it, a change for the better will soon take place, and you will yet see bright and happy days in your youth. After supper a devout evening prayer was read; then every one went to his couch with the hearty wish of a "good night." But the harper had no "good night." When the maid awoke in the early morning and approached his bed to awaken him, she became very much frightened, when she saw his feet and hands tremble. "The journey in this cold weather has undermined the little health I had left, my poor child," he muttered, while Johanna burst into tears, "and if I do not receive speedy help I am afraid my days upon this world will not be many more." With hurried steps the maiden hastened and related to Netter and his good wife the awful misfortune that had befallen her guardian. "We must not delay a minute, not a moment is to be lost," replied the host, his heart overflowing with pity for the old man and the young being. "But be consoled; help is near; Gertrude of Oakdale possesses many healing herbs, and roots of wonderful power. I will send her immediately, and pray her to visit a poor wayfarer who has fallen down sick in my house. She will not disappoint you, or your guardian, as you call him; she will surely come. No one ever prayed for her assistance in vain. Gertrude is a good and obliging woman. Pray in the meantime, dear child. Prayer is the best medicine, and a benevolent God the best physician." And with consolation and new hope in her heart the poor lone child returned to the couch of the old harp player. CHAPTER XXII.—THE KNIGHTS AT OAKDALE. Several years have passed since we, with the young Knight Otto took leave of old Trude of Oakdale. On an early morning, as the autumn sun, proclaiming a beautiful day, gleamed through the rugged branches of the fir trees, we find the old witch sitting in front of her hut, a large prayer book upon her knees reading a few verses, while again and again a stray tear trembles upon her brown eye lashes. She and her surroundings have not materially changed, she is the same old woman of former years, the same brown complexion and the same sorrowful and melancholy eyes. Her hut and the trees surrounding it have also remained unchanged. When Trude perceived the rays of the sun break through the branches, she laid her book, aside and scattered food for the birds upon the ground and bushes and while she laid the herbs which she had gathered the day previous, in the sun, her mind wandered back into the days of the past. "Truly" she muttered to herself, "I am in need of consolation, that the poor heart may not become weak in hope and belief. Now that Rabenfels blooms again in the possession of the old count, who has brought his wife home in such a wonderful way, the offspring of this noble race is absent, whom I tore from the revenge threatening hands of the awful Gassler, and raised him for a happy future. Oh, why did I let the boy away from my side, to enter into the wild doings of this world? Oh, if the boy should not return to me! Was it not enough that I had to lose my infant daughter, in a most cruel manner? Perhaps the boy at this moment is shedding his precious blood in the far off land in battle with the Saracens; or starving a slow death in the enemy's dungeon or is, perhaps, being torn to pieces by wild and blood-thirsty animals of the desert? Oh, God of mercy, help, help this poor unfortunate woman." The witch wept most pitifully, and leaning weak and trembling upon her juniper staff, she surrendered herself to a quiet and deep despondency. Again she asked herself—her face became paler beneath the brown dye, and the gaze of the eyes became duller:

"Sigismund Gassler, what may have become of him? I must console myself with the thought that eternal providence ordained it thus, or permitted it. And does not the proverb in my book say: 'God smiles upon us; and all will change.' The days of sorrow will give place to joy and happiness. Take courage, Gertrude; the end of your days is distant yet. Yonder, above the stars, the poor and persecuted knight-lady is well known. Be quiet, my heart." During this soliloquy she had involuntarily cast her gaze upon the merry birds, who were pecking their food from the ground and bushes. But now she looked up, and what an apparition—a mailed knight, seated high upon a fiery steed, ascended Oakhill at his full speed. "That is my beloved son!" exclaimed the old woman, and she danced in the ecstasy of her joy, like a youthful maiden. Then she hurried, leaning on her juniper staff, to meet the approaching knight. But three steps from him she suddenly stopped; a deadly terror had overcome her, and she stood as if rooted to the ground. Her face assumed an ashy paleness; her eyes became vacant, her feet trembled; she was about to sink down in a swoon. But the knight descended quickly from his horse and hurried to her support. "Gertrude," he commenced, as he led the old witch toward her oaken seat near the door, "you must not be afraid of me as you were once in the room of Hans Netter, the blacksmith, when I followed you in my passion, with my sword drawn to kill you. Ah, no, good Gertrude, knight Gassler is not so bad and wicked as in the days of the past! I would not harm a hair upon your venerable head." "See," he recommenced when the old woman had gained her usual self-possession and she looked upon him with a moved and melancholy gaze, "see, misfortunes have brought me to my senses, have made another man of me. Do you remember those terrible moments upon the drawbridge when the fiery tongues of Rabenfels' conflagration reached to the black sky above? You remember how I fell into the ditch below. When I lay there, badly wounded, on my right leg, my whole body broken down and prostrated, then the recollection of my innumerable bad deeds passed before my soul; and such agony as I suffered there I believe, has seldom been the lot of a despairing sinner. I thought my end was near; I saw death in its most horrible form stare me in the face. Then the Fish Veit saw me in my condition and saved me—and I hope, my soul. I believe God in his mercy sent him that I might atone for my former wickedness. I recovered from my accident after a long and protracted illness, took the red cross and went to Palestine.—Wherever the danger was greatest there I was always among the first. Often I prayed to the Almighty to accept my repentance and to give me an opportunity to repair the great misfortunes of Rabenfels of which I was the originator. Often I prayed thus, and at last, after long years it was heard. And see—the Knight of the Burning Castle, Otto of Rabenfels—" "How," exclaimed the witch, suddenly interrupting the speaker. "My own, adopted, darling boy? Where is he? Gassler, tell me, where will I find him? Speak, speak!" "Fell into mortal peril, and I saved him just as the sword in the hands of a blood-thirsty infidel was about to descend upon his unguarded head." "But where is he now?" asked the witch breathless with impatience. "Why did he not return with you?" Her words were suddenly cut short by a well-known voice that sounded from behind the hut, "Welcome to Oakdale!" And the next moment Otto of Rabenfels rested in the arms of his faithful foster-mother, both shedding tears of the deepest joy. Knight Gassler stepped aside and uncovering his head he thanked God in a fervent prayer, that he had been, by His grace, the instrument to bring about this happy meeting. But Trude gazed proudly and with happy satisfaction at the noble form of her adopted son. "O, you beloved boy," she whispered, kissing him upon his brow and giving him her blessing. "How painfully have I waited your return. How every moment of your absence seemed to drag! But now, that you are with me again, the happy days of your future shall begin! No more sorrow for my beloved Otto; nothing but pleasure and happiness." Then she turned to Gassler, who had approached in the meantime, pressed his hand, with pleasant, though sad emotion, and said: "To you, sir knight, I owe my heartfelt thanks for your noble deed, by which you saved my darling boy from the jaws of death. God will reward you for it. Believe me, the old hag of Oakdale who told you the truth so spitefully in the house of Hans Netter in times gone by, may prophecy you good fortune and happy days. But may I ask you a ques-