

THE SERFS.

FROM THE GERMAN BY JAMES F. COBB.

NO one will do that," replied the bailiff, with a malicious smile, for he knew by thus contradicting him he would urge his master on to still greater severity.

"Ha! ha!" then I shall be the first to do it!" cried the Count. "Let him starve; hunger will make him docile enough; don't give him even bread, we will see whose hand is the hardest. He shall implore me, and when he has begged of me, then I will have him thrashed!"

Only too gladly did the bailiff fulfil the Count's command. He brought the unhappy prisoner neither bread nor water. Schober scarcely remarked it. He was not thinking about himself, nor what was happening to him. Quietly would he have sacrificed his life if by so doing he could have purchased the happiness and freedom of his family. His son's fate filled his mind; in one moment had the happiness he had called his own been swept from him, and he could not help fearing that the Count would vent his rage on Heinrich too, that he would punish him also. Perhaps he was already a prisoner in the Castle. No sleep came to his eyes. He wished to remain quiet and composed, and yet despair more and more took compassion of him; he sprang up, and wildly and violently shook the iron bars across his little window. They defied his strength; his arm sank back exhausted. Then tears started into his eyes, and he, the strong man, wept over the hard fate which had given him up to the will and cruelty of the Count. As a serf, he had no rights.

There was a law, indeed, which did not permit the lord of the manor to give a serf more than fifteen blows at a time; but it was a dead letter. And if the Count were to have him whipped to death, who would stand up against the powerful proprietor and accuse him? What court of justice would hear such an accusation and give satisfaction? The Count's arm reached further than the petitions and accusations of all his serfs. With gold he could open every door and every ear for himself.

Again several days had passed, and no one knew anything about the luckless Schober's fate. In vain had some neighbours besought Heinrich to go to the Castle and intercede with the Count for his father.

"I cannot," he had replied. "If I implore the Count, —if I throw myself on my knees before him in vain,—if his heart shows no compassion, then I shall not be able to control myself; I shall have no mastery over my passion; then it will cost him his life, even were I to strangle him with my bare hands. And what, then, would be my father's fate? Would not my deed be revenged on him, on my mother, my sister, even on my unhappy bride? And even if I slew the Count, another proprietor would succeed him, who would, perhaps, be still more cruel."

He sent the men away, and sought out solitary spots in the fields and the forest. All the powers of his mind were fixed on one thought—on the deliverance of his father; but much as he thought over it he could devise no way of effecting it.

He was one day sitting alone in a ravine staring before him fixedly on the ground. It was a warm, sunny afternoon. What did it matter to him? In his heart it felt as if never a beam of joy or happiness could penetrate there again. Should he implore the Count for mercy? Should he try to soften his heart? Had the man any pity?

The sound of a horse's hoofs, not far off, startled him. He looked up. The Count was galloping through the ravine. Two of his great dogs accompanied him. He looked dark and angry.

Heinrich's heart beat violently when he saw the hated man. He wished to spring up and hasten out of the ravine in order not to meet him; but the thought of his father kept him back. Fate seemed to have brought the lord of the manor hither. He was alone with him. No one could hear him. He would beg him, implore him to spare his father, not to punish him.

He remained standing in the middle of the road.

"Stand back, fellow!" cried the Count as he approached him.

Heinrich did not stir from the spot.

"Most gracious master," he begged, "spare my father! do not have him beaten!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the Count mockingly. "Have you learned to beg at last? I thought your mouth had forgotten such words! But you made a mistake, boy, your father will not get off so easily. I shall pay him out now what I have owed him for years!"

"Most gracious sir," repeated Heinrich, "have pity on my father! Do not order him to be beaten!"

"Yes, fellow!" cried the Count, "I will bend his stiff, proud neck. To-morrow I will have him whipped in the middle of the village till he sinks on his knees and begs for mercy. All shall see it; you among the number! Through him will I show you all that you are only miserable serfs,—dogs that I can have whipped to death if it pleases me!"

"Gracious master!" Heinrich exclaimed, "have compassion; let me be punished for my father, but spare him, only spare him! It was for me he interfered, he could not see me ill-used, and it is for this cause that he is to suffer!"

"Yes, for this cause," cried the Count, mocking him. "For this cause, rascal! And you, too, shall feel my punishment next!"

"I am not afraid," replied Heinrich, with increasing excitement. "I will bear everything quietly if only my father is not punished!"

"To-morrow in the middle of the village, shall he make acquaintance with the whip."

"No; you dare not do it!" cried Heinrich, no longer able to master his temper.

"Ha, ha! I dare not do it! Will you prevent me? Try it! Come, march out of my way!"

The Count put spurs to his horse. Heinrich did not stir from the spot. As the horse dashed upon him he seized its bridle and held it back.

"You dare not have my father whipped!" he exclaimed, and his eyes flashed. "You must have pity; he is a man like yourself!"

"Back!" cried the Count, furiously. "Let go the horse, rascal!"

"Not till you have assured me of my father's forgiveness! Not before that!—not before that!" replied Heinrich, still holding the bridle tightly in his hand.

The Count's heavy riding whip now came down upon his head. He still firmly held the bridle—his own and his father's fate must be decided.

"Back!" exclaimed the Count once more.

"You dare not have my father beaten!" cried Heinrich, forgetting everything, violently, threateningly.

At a call from the Count both his dogs rushed upon Heinrich and dragged him down. In vain did he try to drive off the animals, they held him firmly to the ground.

With a loud, mocking laugh, the Count sprang from his horse.

"I will show you what is in store for your father to-