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THE TRAVELLER'S LAST INN; OR, THE INN-KEEPER OF SAUVERGNE.

A PRUSSIAN TALE OF THRILLING INTEREST.

By the Author of "The Orange Girl of Venice," and other Tales.

[CONCLUDED.]

CHAPTER II.

The traveller's hall was large and roomy, well lighted, and furnished with a heavy bar in one corner, a large oblong table in the centre, and a vast number of chairs and settees scattered through and ranged along the sides of the walls.

Behind the bar were two good-looking females, whose tall, stout, well-knit frames, and bold, well-shaped features, stamped them of an extremely masculine character. They were, evidently, sisters, and could not apparently have been over six or eight-and-twenty years of age.

The landlady was sitting at the large, oblong table, earnestly engaged in perusing a newspaper. As we entered, he threw down the paper, and rose to wait upon us. He was tall and stout, with a fine set of Roman features—a lofty brow, grey, bushy hair, and an eye filled with the spirit of benevolence. Still, despite his frank, generous look, there was something so repulsive in the ensemble of his features, that I felt my heart knocking against my breast, as if warning me of danger. As his eye met that of my companion, his lip for a moment quivered, and a slight tremor ran like a shock of electricity through the muscles of his frame.

My companion's face, as he seated himself opposite me, was flushed with some mysterious excitement. Our feet met under the table, and his pressed mine significantly, for a moment, and was then immediately withdrawn.

The food that we had called for was set before us, together with a large flagon of foaming ale, from which we filled our long, narrow glasses, as we despatched our meal.

What cheer, friends? asked our host, seating himself at the table, a short distance from us.

The King still reigns in Prussia, replied my companion, without looking up; and threatens, in his last manifesto, to look better to the laws!

Ah! observed the host, with a laugh; the old tale. He has been threatening that, to my knowledge, these ten years.

But he speaks emphatically, now, continued my companion, with a meaning, and to me, mysterious emphasis. In which case, parties who have long laughed at the laws, will have a prospect of punishment. The whips and prisons of Frederick are so perfect, they are only surpassed by—

What? His scaffolds? was the sarcastic reply.

The face of the inn-keeper blanched, and his eyes shot fire at my companion.

A sensation of danger crept over me at this reply; why, I could not comprehend; but it stole over me like the cold crawling of a snake, and made me shiver.

It was evident that our host and my companion had met before—not as friends, but as enemies.

The whips, prisons, and scaffolds of Frederick are only for criminals, said the inn-keeper slowly, in the tone of a man who knew himself in converse with a foe, and wished every word to fall upon his ear like the repeated blows of a sledge-hammer.

'Tis true, said my companion coldly. In which case, continued the inn-keeper, in the same long drawn tone, Prussia will at last be rid of one of the most rascally highwaymen that ever infested her roads.

Ah! observed my companion, calmly. Yes, Prussia will rejoice, for then the last of the great rascals will have been swept away.

Indeed! to whom do you allude? It is impossible for you not to comprehend me. I speak of the highwayman. Prussia unfortunately knows many; but they are small operators, mere nobodies, compared with him of whom all Prussia speaks with horror and affright. Men speak of him as the highwayman. Beside his deeds, the crimes of the entire robber horde of the country sink into insignificance.

I am so very ignorant, persisted my companion, and so great a stranger to this part of the country, having but recently arrived here, that I must still plead my utter inability to comprehend you.

What! you mean to say that you do not know this great robber, with whose name every child in Prussia is familiar? I mean to say so.

And yet you are a Prussian? 'Tis true, I am a Prussian.

'Then you are a mystery,' replied the inn-keeper, sarcastically.

'So be it,' replied the other, with a laugh, nevertheless, I am anxious to learn the name of this great highwayman, whose crimes are so well known in Prussia, that they strike terror to the hearts of all ages and sexes, and for whose head the scaffolds of Frederick are so impatiently waiting.

'His name—you wish to know his name? Have I not said so?'

'You wish me to pronounce it here, before this gentleman, your companion?' continued the inn-keeper, maliciously.

'Certainly. My friend here has stout nerves, of which I have had good proof, within the last few hours, and will not faint on hearing it. He is no woman, and can listen to the most frightful things without shuddering. Give us the name of this terrible highwayman, by all means.'

'The name, then, gentlemen, of this man of a thousand crimes—the name of this great criminal, held in such horror and detestation throughout all Prussia—the name of this terrible man, whose infamous history is in the mouths of all—the name of this monstrous being, whom the laws have long since prejudged, and for whose capture there is a standing offer of three thousand thalers, to any man or body of men who will deliver him into the hands of a magistrate—the name of this man, for whom the prison yawns and the scaffold halts, is—'

'Ruder!' interrupted my travelling companion, with a laugh, as he emptied his glass. 'That is capital beer.'

'Ha! you know his name at last,' said the inn-keeper, with a sneering smile.

'Certainly,' returned the other coolly. 'You dragged in the details—details that I have heard so often—so eloquently, I could not help recalling it. So, you think there is now hope that Prussia will soon be rid of Ruder—Ruder, for whose capture and arrest there is a standing reward of three thousand thalers?'

'Of course. He is the greatest rogue in the country, and now the King has resolved to put the laws, relative to criminals, in force, Ruder being the greatest, of course cannot escape.'

'O, indeed! But how comes it that he is so likely to be caught now? I thought, and report will sustain the idea, that Ruder has not been seen in Prussia for the last seven years?'

'It is true,' returned the inn-keeper, 'but I have good authority for supposing that he has been seen in Prussia within the last ten days.'

'Ha!' exclaimed my travelling companion, with a slight start. 'Is it so? Whence came the news?'

'I read it, as you came in, in the paper. The name of the paper?'

'The Anhalt Courier.'

'So, so. On learning his arrival, why did they not arrest him?'

'They learned it not till he had made his way out of the town in which he was recognized.'

'Ha! he was recognized, then? By whom?'

'A former comrade.'

'Humph! Then the authorities are, it is to be inferred, by this time, on his track?'

'Doubtless. The reward is great, and the highwayman without money, arms, or friends,' and the inn-keeper bent his eyes upon my companion with what seemed to me a malignantly triumphant smile.

The latter, however, having his eyes down in thought, did not perceive it. At length, raising his head, and gazing steadily at the inn-keeper, he observed:

'It would be a rare sight if one prison should receive mine host of the Inn of Sauvergne and Ruder the highwayman. Rarer still, if one scaffold should hang them.'

'Very—very rare!' returned the inn-keeper, with a smile so ghastly that I trembled while I looked at him.

'If I remember,' continued my travelling companion, with a strange light in his eye, 'five thousand thalers, and a free pardon to any criminal, are offered for his head, dead or alive. Am I not right?'

'There is a report to that effect,' muttered the inn-keeper, with a dry cough.

'Together with a thousand thalers in addition, for each of his infamous family. Am I right?'

'I believe so.'

'There are six persons in his family.'

'Nay, only five—his wife is dead.'

'Well, say there are five. Shall I name them?'

'Nay, that is your affair, not mine.'

'Perhaps so. There are five, then—the inn-keeper, two daughters and two sons. Have I named them right?'

'Granting that you have, what then?'

'Here, then, are two parties, for whom the King offers an aggregate of thirteen thousand thalers—three thousand for the highwayman and ten thousand for the criminals of the Traveller's Last Inn. Now, then, here are two parties, whose mutual interest it is to sustain and defend each other; for both stand within the grasp of law, and both will, if arrested, be swung from the scaffold.'

money or arms—he is just arrived in the country, and is, therefore, without power or comrades. It seems to me, then, that all the talent, courage, and power, lie on one side.'

'You know nothing of his power or his plans, and, therefore, can form no opinion in the matter. At all events, come what may, of the two parties, Ruder is the safest. The danger, if the king carries his threats into effect, is to the parties of the Sauvergne Inn, and not to the highwayman.'

The inn-keeper laughed.

'Well,' said he, 'we'll not argue the question. Let the people of the inn, as well as the highwayman, settle their own business with the king. They'll be brought together soon enough. Who can tell what a day may bring forth?'

'Precisely,' said the other, rising. 'But come, the hour grows late, and I must rise with the dawn. My comrade and I will retire. Show us to our chamber.'

'Stay,' said the inn-keeper, 'you forget your purses and your valuables.'

'What of them?' said my comrade.

'You know it is customary for travellers, on retiring for the night, to leave their money and their valuables at the bar. My daughters will give you a receipt for them. In the morning you will return the receipts, and again receive your deposits.'

'Faith,' said my companion, winking at me slyly, 'I have nothing to leave. In coming through the forest, the wolves made for us, and we were compelled to throw away everything that stood in the way of our flight.'

'But you have pistols, knives—'

'No, by my faith, nor any thing else. The wolves made us part with every thing, save change enough to pay our lodgings, and a meal or two. Good night.'

'Good night,' returned the inn-keeper, in a tone of disappointment.

We followed up a young man, who preceded us with a lamp, up three flights of stairs, to a chamber, having in it a large double bed and a small dressing table, that stood between two chairs.

The young man set the lamp upon the table, and asked if we had any further orders.

'None,' said my companion.

The attendant then vanished, after carefully closing the door.

CHAPTER III.

My companion pointed me to a chair, and then threw himself upon the other.

'Your name?' said he, in a low, cautious tone.

'Louis Verginand. And yours?'

'Herman Graf. Remember it, as I shall remember yours.'

'But why?'

'You will understand it in a moment. Do you know where we are?'

'Of course.'

'Where are we, then?'

'At Berse.'

'Hush! I think I hear footsteps.'

He rose softly and put his ear to the key-hole.

'Did you hear anything?' said I as he returned to his chair.

'Yes—but no matter. Things will go on as they will. I asked you if you knew where we were.'

'You did, and I replied at Berse.'

Herman laughed; but never before had I heard a laugh so much resemble the hoarse wail of one in agony, and the blood rushed coldly through my heart.

'What if I tell you that I discovered the character of the town, and recognized the features of our entertainers, immediately on entering the inn?'

'What then?' said I, somewhat confused and frightened by his manner.

Herman groaned impatiently.

'Man! man!' he exclaimed, 'will you not understand me? We are not at Berse! Not at Berse! I responded fearfully. For heaven's sake where are we then?'

At Berse, in a fearful whisper. 'Death is here, as well as on your couch. Deliverance is not here, and it may be where that couch will lead us. Dare you try it?'

'I dare.'

'Enough. Follow me.'

We threw ourselves carefully upon the bed, in the attitude of men in a profound slumber, with our arms hands concealed between us and the coverlid.

The couch continued to descend very gently, noiselessly and slowly—down—down—down.

It seemed to me an age. I would have given worlds, were it in my power, to have had our descent accelerated, and our fate hastened. But it was not to be. We were to suffer the agony of uncertainty and protracted doom.

We continued to descend slowly as before, and as noiselessly—with nothing to meet us on the way—no light, no executioner, to break the monotony of our agony.

I at length resigned myself silently to the terrible torture, and threw out my hand. It struck against a wall. By the feeling in my knuckles, I was suddenly rejoiced to find that we had begun to descend faster than before.

'Thank God, I involuntarily exclaimed aloud, 'we are nearing our journey's end.'

'Hush,' whispered my companion; 'we are nearing a vault. I know it by the peculiarity of the air. Be ready for a spring.'

My mind was made up, my first trust put in my destiny, and I felt no longer the length of time consumed by the descension of the bed.

In a few minutes the air came sweeping all about us.

'We are in the vault,' whispered my companion. 'Spring, in God's name.'

He passed over me and left; and I immediately followed in his way.

'Your hand, and tread cautiously,' whispered Herman.

We had scarcely passed on twenty paces, in the darkness, when the faint rays of a torch loomed like the first rays of the moon through the vault.

'Stoop,' and crawl forward, whispered my companion.

We fell upon our knees, and, side by side, crawled forward.

'Our victims are in the toils,' said a voice behind us.

Unconsciously I turned my head and beheld five persons descending a flight of stairs immediately behind the bed.

'They descended slowly and approached the bed. One of the parties raised a torch on high, while the others raised their hands.'

'Now,' cried a voice.

And five hands, each armed with a poignard, immediately fell upon the couch.

No groan followed; and discovering the state of things, everything was, in a moment, in a state of wild confusion.

'Furies!' cried a voice, 'they have escaped. They must be here—spread through the vault.'

In a moment we heard steps behind, beside, and ahead of us. There was but one torch, however, to guide them, and they made but slight progress.

'Run,' cried a voice which I immediately recognised as that of the inn-keeper; 'run for more lights.'

Meanwhile we crept toward the right side of the vault and crept into a niche that was made in the wall. Leaning back we felt a dead weight upon our backs, and we stooped forward gently to shake it off.

The next moment a fall, like that of two solid bodies, fell to the earth. The effusion that immediately after saluted our nostrils, warned us of the terrible fact that it was two corpses that we had so unceremoniously disturbed.

Unable to endure the terrible stench before us, we stole simultaneously from the niche, and passing to the left, dropped upon our knees.

At this moment another light appeared on the staircase, together with a form, which, despite the long robe enveloping it from neck to heel, we were assured was that of a female.

In a few moments the woman passed us, to assist her companions. Still creeping through the gloom, we continued to crawl forward toward the staircase.

'Ho, come forth, or expect no mercy,' suddenly cried the voice of the inn-keeper. A short pause succeeded. Meanwhile, we continued our course, till we had reached the earth immediately under the couch.

'We must smoke them out,' continued the inn-keeper. 'Ho, Hans, run up and bring the sulphur; we'll give them a foretaste of—'

A light glared in the gloom; it approached, and in a few moments a young man, bearing a torch, came near us; a moment more, and he ascended the stairs.

Herman laid his hand significantly upon my arm. Meanwhile the voice of the inn-keeper broke through the gloom, commanding us to come forth.

We crawled from our hiding place, and got under the staircase.

'Before us the vault stretched far away, till the light looked like a star in the midst of a vast room, and the assassins had dwindled into dwarfs. Suddenly we heard footsteps on the staircase. It was one of the assassins bringing down the sulphur.'

'For the last time,' cried the inn-keeper, 'will ye come forth?'

A dead silence followed.

'Bring the sulphur,' continued the inn-keeper, 'we'll strangle them.'

The young man approached them with a pail in one hand and a torch in the other. At this moment we crept from under the stairs and slowly ascended the steps.

'They want it, and they shall have it,' cried the inn-keeper, with an oath.

And he began slowly to drop the sulphur in a line, backing meanwhile toward the stairs, followed by his companions, whose arms were lifted ready for a blow, and whose eyes wandered uneasily around them, in search of the victims who were now beyond their reach.

The parties reached the stairs, with the long sulphurous train marking the course he had pursued.

CHAPTER IV.

We listened a moment at the crevices of the door, but save a few low groans, like those of persons in the last stage of human agony, we heard nothing.

'They are caught in their own snare,' muttered my companion. 'For the present we are safe. We have now but one difficulty.'

'And that is—'

'To reach the traveller's room. If we find a light there, all is well.'

We groped our way along the wall till we came to an opening. Turning this, we soon reached an entry, faintly lighted by a lamp from a contiguous apartment. Following the light we soon found ourselves in the traveller's room.

Save ourselves it was devoid of human beings. A clock hung over the bar, and the hour hand was on the point of two.

'We are up early,' said Herman, with a strange smile. 'And early rising deserves to be rewarded—what will you drink?'

'Brandy,' I replied with a faint smile; 'my nerves want something.'

He placed a bottle before me, together with a glass. I filled a bumper, and drank. He followed suit, then returned the bottle and glasses to their places.

We now seated ourselves to converse, and arrange our plans.

'We have escaped,' said Herman, grasping my hand. 'Let us congratulate each other.'

'But we are not yet out of Sauvergne,' said I warningly.

'Tis true. But shall we quit it immediately, or wait for the earliest hour of dawn to assist us?'

'Can we then quit the inn without being seen?'

'I think so. It will be light enough at four, and the people in this section never rise till five. We shall therefore have the friendly aid of daylight, and be a good long way out of the town before the waking of the people.'

'So be it, then. We'll wait to the opening of the dawn.'

We passed the intervening time in reviewing the events of the night, and in dwelling on our plans. Ere we are aware of it, the first grey streaks of morning came stealing through the panes above the door.

We hurried forth, and locking the doors behind us, took the road to Anhalt.

It was hard on to noon when we entered the town. The clock was just uttering the hour, as we crossed the threshold of the chief magistrate's office, in which we found assembled a crowd of some thirty or forty persons.

A man was making a deposition before the magistrate, who was listening intently to every word, while a clerk was busily engaged in transferring it to paper.

My companion elbowed his way through the crowd, to the desk, and with his hat in his hand, took his position beside that of the man who was making the deposition.

Herman cast his eyes incidentally upon the latter, and then colored to the temples.

Determined to understand the cause of this, I worked round the crowd till I was in a line with them; and then in the stranger, making the deposition, I recognised the face of the miller, whom we had passed the day before, in the forest.

At this moment, he had deposed to all he had to say, and he turned casually, and his eyes fell on Herman.

In a moment, his features became suffused with a death-like paleness, his eyes dropped as if they had encountered some terrible enemy, and his limbs were seized with a deep trembling.

'My God!' he exclaimed, in a low, trembling voice, 'tis he—'tis Ruder!'

'Ruder!' exclaimed the magistrate, starting up, and staggering back. 'Where?'

'There,' exclaimed the miller, pointing to Herman.

In an instant, the court was in a state of the wildest confusion. All started back from where Herman stood, as if a shell had fallen among them. Some fled; but in another moment at a sign from the magistrate, five men, whose official badge proclaimed their character, suddenly precipitated themselves upon my late companion, and bore him to the floor.

He made no resistance, and they forced him into an adjoining room, where he was immediately chained, hand and foot, and all power of defence, even if he felt so inclined, taken away from him.

All this passed so suddenly, that it seemed to me like a dream.

So sudden had been the discovery, action, and arrest, and the consequent excitement attending it, that, when the door was locked upon the highwayman, every face in the court was as pale as ashes.

Having collected my wits, I now advanced toward the desk, and bending over, whispered a few words in the magistrate's ear.

'A few words in private, sir?' said I. 'Any business of importance?'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Follow me.'

He turned to a room toward the left, into which we entered. We seated ourselves, and I gave him a detailed history of the events that had transpired, from the

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