



THE
GOD SEEKER

PETER ROSEGGER



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BY PETER ROSEGGER.

THE GOD SEEKER.

A Tale of Old Styria. Authorized English
version by FRANCES E. SKINNER. 12°, \$1.50.

THE FOREST SCHOOLMASTER.

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The God Seeker

A Tale of Old Styria

By Peter Rosegger

Author of "The Forest Schoolmaster," etc.

Authorized Translation
by
Frances E. Skinner

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PREFACE

THE principal events of *The God Seeker* are founded on historical facts. In the year 1493, in a remote part of the Styrian Alps, the little village of Tragös was excommunicated from the Church and outlawed for a crime committed by one member of the parish.

It seems almost incredible that an entire community could be made to suffer for the crime of one person. In an age, however, when the Catholic Church wielded such tremendous power, and when superstition frequently took the place of justice,—as was the case when the “*Vehmic Law*” and “*The Judgment of God*” were resorted to,—it is not surprising.

A few years ago Herr Rosegger, accompanied by his two young sons, made a pilgrimage to the valley of the God Seeker, where the village of Tragös still stands, with its old church, now restored and re-established as a place of worship. Here relics of the crime committed four hundred years ago are preserved. To-day the village has become a centre for Alpine tourists, and there are few traces left of the unhappy period through which the inhabitants passed when, their God having been taken from them, they were ruled by their own misguided natures.

THE TRANSLATOR.

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BOOK I
THE CRIME

CHAPTER I

THE narrator of this story, who now takes you by the hand to wander with you through a region wild and gloomy, and in our day utterly unknown, leads you at first up the Johannesberg. This mountain rises in the form of a cone in the midst of a wilderness which creeps far up its sides, where among the broken rocks flourish the barberry and the black alder, the hemlock and the true-love. In the clefts above the falcon builds its nest and on the ground beneath circles and glides the adder. The mountain is not so high as many of its neighbours, but upon its summit is a barren spot where no green thing will grow. If at some time, after a thousand springs, a flower should bloom on this sterile bit of land, then, according to the legend, the kingdom of God would be established in the earth.

Here, where the sandy ground is covered with greenish lichens, may be seen a huge, grey rock marked by a blood-red stain, which no rain can wash out and no ice can erase.

Surrounding the Johannesberg, as far as the eye can reach, is a wide stretch of forest land, extending to the lower slopes of the Ritscher, the Birstling,

and the Tärn. This forest—and no tree, or bush, or plant exists in the northern hemisphere that is not found therein—spreads like a vast sea over the mountain tops, over the valleys and ravines, on, on into the distance, where the blue dome of heaven with its fringe of snowy clouds sinks into the horizon. But towards the north, on the other side of the wide, dark valley, called Trawies, towers a wall of rocky cliffs, their grey, jagged edges sharply outlined against the sky, their crevices marked by lines of gleaming white. Here begins a mountain range quite unknown to us, as it was also unknown to the people who once inhabited this region, struggling with and at last succumbing to an evil fate. It is called the Trasank. From out its rocky caverns gushes forth a thundering stream, which tearing along on its wild journey tells us much of the majestic grandeur of the mountains whence it derives its source. The Trach—as this river is named—now digs its way through the narrow valleys and gloomy ravines, on through the forests, absorbing into itself innumerable little streams and brooks, until at last it reaches the barren heathland, which shuts off the region of Trawies from all the outside world.

A large part of this tract of land is primeval forest. Its owner, a wealthy nobleman, who lives far below in a city by the sea and who has never seen the rocks of the Trasank, has left it in its wild state, uncared for and neglected. Only in the lower parts of the Trawies basin is the forest in its prime. Where it stands to-day, flourished many years ago

a small parish. At the time of the migration of the nations, when the Germanic races were scattered between the Alps and the Baltic, a handful of people took up their abode in this wilderness; they settled on the banks of the Trach, ploughed and built, gradually becoming bound by ties of affection to each other and to their own race, now developing under more favourable circumstances. They submitted to one common law and enjoyed the blessings of a community. Trawies became a mountain parish, like many others in the region. Upon a rocky eminence in the valley of the Trach, facing the sun and surrounded by a luxuriant growth of underbrush, still stand the ruins of the little church in which the people of Trawies for generations back had so often lifted their hearts in prayer to God, and where at last they were overtaken by their most horrible doom.

Even to this day everyone avoids its crumbling walls, and, with the exception of bold hunters, people pass much against their wills through the forests of Trawies. And he who is obliged to do so hastens, for in every shadow he sees a ghost, in every gleam of light shimmering through the branches he imagines the camp-fire of some robber band. Those dwelling in the outlying districts fear the mists that rise over Trawies, crossing themselves whenever storms from that direction descend upon them. Floods have often broken loose from this ill-famed forest, destroying the land, as if it continued to rest under the curse which long ago, in wrath and indignation, was pronounced upon the narrow valley

of Trawies, arousing to a white heat the infuriated passions in the hearts of the people, and which at last on that fateful day, from the summit of the Johannesburg, ascended in pure flame to the skies and was then extinguished.

CHAPTER II

SINCE time immemorial the people of Trawies had celebrated Midsummer Day by a curious festival, one striking feature of which was that no church bells were allowed to ring. For this reason, on the preceding evening the bell-ropes were drawn up and wound about the clapper. Even the church service was omitted on this day, for the priest also took part in this "Festival of the Forefathers." At that small hour of the night which, like a tiny drawbridge, unites yesterday with to-day, three men were walking through the dewy valley of the Trach, singing the following song:

Fair Midsummer Day is come !
The blessed day !
The golden day !
Arise,
Arise at the dawn's first ray !
From graves emerging,
From slumbers holy,
The guests beloved assemble slowly.
Awaken, awaken,
The sun joy is giving,
Oh drink ye, my brothers,
At this fount ever living.
Fire and light our God doth make,
Awake ! Awake !

And behold: in the scattered houses of Trawies were movement and life; the people came forth and assembled on the green, oak-shaded burial-ground, where, beneath the sod, they had laid their dead to rest, and, seeking the graves of their dear departed ones, they repeated these words: "My father, I waken thee!" or: "My brother, I waken thee: Holy Midsummer Day is here!" And the friendly stars shone down upon them from the sky, while many a dreamer of Trawies gazed heavenward to catch a glimpse of Him Who with His strong arm will, on this day, lift the sun even to His eternal brow, then cast it again into space.

From the graveyard the people ascended to a field called the Midsummer Meadow. All were conscious of the presence of their beloved dead, whom they had awakened and invited to celebrate with them this merry feast.

They now lighted a great fire from a spark which had descended to them from ancient times. It had always been the custom, before extinguishing the festal flames, for one of the oldest and most respected inhabitants of Trawies to take a glowing ember from this ancestral fire back to his house, where from year to year it was most sacredly preserved. The fire guardian, as this man was called, was exempt from tithes and taxes, and in seasons of illness the people would fetch a burning coal from his hearth, to purify their houses with the smoke from the sacred fire. At the time this story opens, the dignified office of fire guardian was held by a man whose house stood by the river Trach,

He clung with great tenacity to the traditions of the past, thus maintaining his purity of heart and strength of purpose. He was the most powerfully built man in Trawies; his name was Gallo Weissbucher. In the springtime, when in the valley of the Trach the seed was sprouting in the brown earth, the people, with an ember from the ancestral fire, would light piles of brushwood on the borders of their fields, that the smoke might float over the fertile soil and ward off disasters from their harvests.

And thus the fire was lighted which burned upon the meadow on this day. Gathered about it, the people chanted weird songs, that gradually became more animated, then even boisterous, and at last, as the sun reddened the western sky, rent the air with their wild uproar. For mead was drunk as an accompaniment to the roasted game, and cider flowed in streams, quickening the pulses of the youths and maidens who formed in circles for the dance, and far and wide the forests of Trawies re-echoed with the shouting upon the Midsummer Meadow. The invited dead seemed to play but a small part in these festivities, and as the day drew to a close, when, according to custom, they should have been accompanied back to their quiet resting-places, many a young pair forgot this sacred duty, and it is said that the restless spirits of the neglected guests would then hover an entire year about their thoughtless young relatives.

Since time immemorial the Midsummer Festival had been thus celebrated in Trawies.

On these occasions it was the custom for the fire

guardian to make a speech at high noon under the spreading oak-trees. It was his first duty to assure his audience that the ancestral fire had been sacredly preserved throughout the entire year, and that it was a spark from that spark which, in olden times, their forefathers had received from the "White Lady" in the German forests. The speaker then reviewed the year just past, enumerated the deaths, the births, and the marriages; he also mentioned the most prominent deeds of the inhabitants of Trawies, whether good or evil. So to some it came to be a day of exaltation; to others, a day of judgment. Reference was finally made to the bonds which united them to the rulers of the land, and it was shown that in spite of the great isolation of this mountain parish, its loyalty was genuine and its obedience to the laws of the community exemplary, so long as these laws did not interfere with the old-time traditions of these denizens of the forest.

But now a new master had come to Trawies, called Pater Franciscus. Like his predecessors he occupied the large stone house upon the rocky eminence near the church. He was small and squarely built, but the expression of his eyes displeased the inhabitants of Trawies from the very first. He was seldom seen in his priestly garb, and he contracted a habit of visiting the various houses to ascertain the amount of worldly goods possessed by the inmates, taxing them according to his own estimate of their value. He was also known to have frequently allowed the bells for prayers for the dying to ring in vain, while he stood fishing by the river Trach, or

wandered about with hunters in the forest. He forbade the people to cut wood or to graze their goats in the hunting preserves. Previously they had been accustomed to bring their festival meats directly from the forest, or to utilise the game for the skins. But this the new master now proscribed and more strictly than all the seven deadly sins together. The people of Trawies during the long and happy period preceding this story had entirely forgotten that they belonged body and soul to their spiritual and worldly rulers, who appropriated the income from the parish, partly for their own use, partly for the support of a convent far away among the hills. The new priest reminded them of this fact in a most marked manner. They groaned under the burden and cursed. The cursing was not forbidden, for the priest well knew that cursing lightens the spirits of slaves, while placing no obligation upon the master. He considered that forsters were intended for beasts of burden, and that the people of Trawies were quite able to endure whatever he thought fit to impose upon them. He at last issued the following order: "The heathenish celebration and feast on Midsummer Day must cease for all time."

This went to the very hearts of these woodspeople. But the fire guardian exclaimed: "No one shall ever be able to say over my grave: 'He who lies here allowed the sacred flame to be extinguished!' It is not on account of the tithes and taxes—these I will pay according to my means; but from the ancestral fire which is in my care shall my

funeral candles be lighted when I enter into everlasting rest!"

"Well spoken, forsooth!" answered the men. But when on the following Midsummer Day they began the celebration by awakening the dead, the priest appeared suddenly in their midst; not with the cross, as Boniface once appeared among the heathen, but with a gun, his finger on the trigger. The men had no fear of the weapon, but they dared not further defy the commands of their master, whom they had always been accustomed to obey. So they dispersed, the fire guardian taking with him the sacred embers.

"Stop! What are you carrying off in that pan?" demanded the priest. "Throw the coals into the water at once."

The fire guardian started on a run, the priest following with weapon raised. The former, being an old man, saw that he could not escape his pursuer.

"You may burn me with your hell-fire," he shouted, "but this sacred flame you shall not destroy!" His house was close by and he hastened towards it.

"Very well," laughed the priest; "but fire cannot be concealed."

As the fire guardian perceived that he could not save his holy trust by any other means, he sprang into his barn and threw the burning coals upon the straw. When the priest reached the spot the man had disappeared and the place was in flames. Both house and barn were burned to the ground. The fire guardian beheld his possessions vanish in the

glow of the ancestral fire. A strong wind descended from the Trasank, fanning the flames, carrying them high into the air and over into the neighbouring woods. There they roared and crackled, and when the morning sun rose, it shone red and dim through the cloud of smoke floating over the burning forest. All Trawies was abroad in jubilant excitement, working with picks and spades to fight the fire.

At evening, when the last trees in that part of the forest where the flames were confined had fallen with a crash, each inhabitant carried a burning torch into his house and laid the same upon his hearth, thus preserving an inexhaustible store of ancestral fire.

The following year, on the day before the celebration, a small number of men assembled at the house of the forest keeper, Baumhackel, to take counsel concerning their Midsummer Festival. The house stood at the end of a narrow valley, about an hour's distance from the church. This valley, called the Wildwiese (the wild meadow), may be known to-day by a waterfall, plunging over a rocky terrace between gigantic fir-trees at the foot of which is a huge hollow basin in the form of a kettle, whence, at the time of this story, a path led up to Baumhackel's little hut.

One of the older men addressed the others with these words: "That which we are about to discuss, men of Trawies, is a solemn matter. Above in the clouds dwells the God of Thunder, watching over us. With his hand of iron he hurls the lightning

down to the earth, and that he may not strike our houses or destroy our forests with its shafts, he requires of us this feast of the sun. The great god upon his chariot of thunder, drawn by two black rams, and the whole army of our sacred dead, borne upon boars and upon fiery steeds, approach, demanding the festal day."

The mysterious words of the old tradition aroused the men and they all cried: "A Midsummer Festival!"

When, after some deliberation, they had arranged to celebrate it this year upon the Wildwiese, one of the men suggested that the priest must be prevented from attending.

"By force?"

"By cunning."

"*Mein Gott*, Isidor, that sounds strangely from your lips."

"How it sounds depends upon your ears; but I say we have no use for the priest at our festival."

"I say so, too!"

"And I!"

"I also!"

"Good, so say we all. But how does that help matters?"

"If the men of Trawies are determined, and stand by one another, does that amount to nothing?"

"You're right, Isidor; I should advise him not to interfere with us this time. There's something brewing in Trawies for our priest."

"That I'll warrant, comrades, but no force must

be used. I tell you, it needs but little to bring misfortune upon us. ”

A man called Wahnfred nodded approvingly.

“ Yes, Wahnfred, this time it ’s your turn. You live in the Gestade, down by the river, two or three hours from the church, in the opposite direction from the Wildwiese. On Midsummer Day someone will be lying in your house at the point of death. Early in the morning the priest must be summoned to come at once. Do you understand ? ”

The men smiled at this suggestion, but Wahnfred, expanding his broad chest, replied : “ May God preserve us in His mercy, but that shall never happen. In my house there shall be no treachery. ”

The head of the man who uttered these words rose almost defiantly above his brawny shoulders. His face was paler, more delicate in colouring, than those of the other men. It showed little exposure to the sun, but there was fire in the large eyes. The cheeks were covered with a light, curly beard, the lips were red and strong and spoke even when silent. The brow was high and narrow, smooth and white ; the reddish-brown hair was combed back and fell like a mane over his shoulders. His appearance was most unusual and striking. Some traits denoted the strength of a Hun ; others, an excessive imagination ; but he might also have been a savage, a lion, a tiger. There are people whose characters always speak like an oracle, yet who are never understood. Even concerning this man’s age one might err by many years ; one moment he seemed to have lived more winters than summers ; the next,

one would say he had seen neither winters nor autumns, but only springs, and of these a great number. Some such description of Wahnfred has come down to us from the old chronicle. His dress, like that of the others, consisted of a coarse linen shirt, fastened at the throat with a black tie, breeches of deer-skin, close-fitting white woollen stockings, and a long brown cloak. Of late the men of Trawies had adopted leather shoes, while the women, in their blue linen gowns, went about barefoot at their simple household tasks. The men wore broad felt hats with kettle-shaped crowns, the brims turned up on both sides and fastened with a white bow. On their wanderings through the forest they always carried a heavy knife at the left side, and a long iron-bound stick, for there were many wild beasts in the region, and also many ravines and mountain torrents to be crossed. Such was the appearance of the men of Trawies.

“ In my house shall be no treachery,” Wahnfred had answered with composure. Baumhackel replied: “ You ’re not the only one who lives in the Gestade. My brother, Little Baumhackel, has a house in that neighbourhood also, and we will have no treachery there either, but he will sacrifice himself for a good cause like this. I will gladly undertake to have my brother, Little Baumhackel, lying sick unto death on Midsummer Day.”

“ That is friendly of you,” replied Isidor; “ and so with God’s help, we shall this year celebrate our sacred feast,”

CHAPTER III

UPON the various paths leading up to the Wildwiese might have been seen on the following night, men and women with heavy baskets in their hands and on their backs; among them was Baumhackel the elder, who had been busy with preparations, resolving that this festival, celebrated in such a secluded spot of the wilderness, and all the more since it was forbidden and must take place in secrecy, should be the finest and merriest they had ever had.

On the Sunday previous, the priest, Franciscus, had made the following announcement from the pulpit: "On next Tuesday, the Feast of St. John, the Martyr, who baptised our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, will be celebrated in our church by all good Christians. Solemn mass will follow the service, and the children of the parish, in as large numbers as possible, are expected to be present. During the high mass a processional will take place about the altar. I trust that you will all confess Christ by your presence. Saint John the Baptist purchased with his blood the kingdom of heaven; and I, as a conscientious shepherd, am determined to lead the stubborn sheep, by force if necessary, into the fold of our beloved Lord."

By force if necessary! How strangely these words sounded within the church! The people were terrified and knew not why. But it was not the threat which frightened them.

On the morning of St. John's Day, as the glow of sunrise appeared in the sky, Herr Franciscus awoke and stretched himself comfortably in his warm, well-made bed. His life had not always been so easy. His father, a harsh, but over-pious bailiff, had sent him from the rough, though merry life of a country squire directly into a monastery. Here he had found a scanty table, but an abundance of praying benches, and instead of amusing himself with bird-snares, there was the rod for his own back. He had but few pleasures and many penances, for the rules were strict and the prior was severe. A thousand pities to thus waste the best years of life! At last his studies were at an end, and he was sent to the little isolated forest parish of Trawies. The place suited him well, and he now hoped to find compensation for his lost pleasures. Here he was master, and resolving to use his powers to the utmost, he was surprised to find that forest peasants should wish to be their own masters. He simply desired to live on good terms with these serfs and ploughmen, but when they discovered that he demanded more of them than his predecessors had done, they grumbled and became defiant. This defiance, however, only awakened that of the priest, and he endeavoured with severity and by force to establish harmony between himself and his parishioners. He longed for peace, and for a happy life

in fellowship with the people, but in his monastery cell he had learned too little of human nature to reach his goal by gentle measures, therefore he employed extraordinary ones; nevertheless, he stretched himself in his comfortable bed, thinking enviously of the life of pleasure led by others in the world outside. He was of a social nature and could be good company to those who would join him in hunting and in cards; the priestly office was a mere side issue. He did not ask himself whether he fulfilled these duties as he should, for had he not been thrust into the office against his will? He spent little time over the parish reports to be regularly rendered to the higher authorities, but, on the other hand, he delivered the taxes and tributes with greater conscientiousness than his predecessors had ever done. Thus he counted upon a long and easy life in the valley of the Trach.

Some such thoughts as these were passing through Herr Franciscus' mind on this morning, when suddenly a knock was heard at the parsonage door. The priest did not stir, but the sonorous voice of a woman called from a window above, asking what was wanted. Surely that heathenish Midsummer Festival was not taking place again!

"Not that," was answered from below, "but Little Baumhackel is dying, and for God's sake send the priest at once."

Soon the priest himself appeared at the window, demanding what ailed the young man.

"We think he has a stroke; he lies quite helpless—he is at death's door, worthy sir."

“ Then I shall be of no use. I will pray for the dying man at mass. You go home now.”

“ I beg of you to show us mercy and come. We all know that he sets so much store by a priest, and there is nothing, not even a Bible, in the house. We cannot help ourselves, and if you, worthy sir, desert us also——”

The priest then dressed himself with a wry face, and the little bell that always accompanies the sacred wafer resounded softly along the banks of the foaming Trach. No wonder that so few people knelt before the houses by which the priest passed, for it was still early in the morning; and it was also no wonder that the beds in the houses were already empty, for it was after midnight.

Fair Midsummer Day is come !

Fire and light our God doth make.

Awake ! Awake !

The song had long since died away; the people had gone in the direction of the Wildwiese. And a curious assemblage it was! One robust lad named Nantel avoided the graveyard, not caring to waken his old cousin,—she might rest undisturbed, and his god-father also. A living companion appealed to him more. So Nantel stopped at a little house which he was passing, rapped on a side window and called: “ Midsummer Day is come! The sun joy is giving. Oh, drink at this fount ever living!” So much of the old song he remembered.

Whoever lived here did not wait for the invitation to be repeated. A young girl soon appeared, and saucily taking the arm of the lad, she proceeded with him on his way.

“Hast thou brought some fire along?” he asked.

“Save thy joking for another time and beware lest I become too hot for thee.”

“I must find out who is the hotter. But I say if we have the fire within ourselves, why do we take the trouble to climb up to the Wildwiese? Why not sit down here and celebrate Midsummer Day on the grass?”

“Oh, Nantel,” replied the girl, “cease thy trifling with such sacred things. And thou knowest that I am not alone.”

He stared at her, his face turning pale.

“Not—not alone, Josa?”

“Late last night I was up in the graveyard to waken my mother.”

“Thy mother,” said Nantel, breathing more freely; “oh, oh, thy departed mother. That’s all right, Josa, if it’s only she, that’s all right.”

And they reached the meadow safely.

Upon another footpath two toppers were striding along.

“I’m going to try it any way,” whispered one
“I’m going to try it.”

“It’ll do no good,” replied the other.

“Little Baumhackel told me it was true, and I believe him.”

“Give it here—let me read it again.”

They held an old torn paper in their hands and read: "A Tried Remedy to Keep People from Waking: Take a lock of maiden's hair for a wick and dip it in adder's fat; it is best to light this candle with Midsummer fire, and in whatever house the burning taper is placed, will no man or woman awake."

"It may be possible," remarked the one who had doubted at first.

"Baumhackel had fine success with his household."

"You don't mean it!"

"Listen, Roderich; Baumhackel's family are great eaters and he was worrying about the coming Whitsunday, when all wanted the best and were content with nothing."

"If they are content with nothing, I should call them modest!"

"You don't understand me, Roderich; they are not satisfied with nothing, that is to say, not satisfied with something—oh, I have it now: with nothing somewhat satisfied."

"Don't wear yourself out, Uli; you mean, there is nothing which satisfies them."

"That's it; and Baumhackel knew that on Whitsunday it would be the same. What do you suppose he did?"

"Took his stick and chased them out."

"Nonsense! For what purpose did he make the candle with adder's fat and maiden's hair? On the eve of Whitsunday, when everyone was asleep, he lighted it and left it burning all the next day until

far into the night. Not a soul awoke and the whole feast was spared."

"That was a great thing."

"That was nothing at all. When the men finally awoke they emptied boxes and barrels and ate everything they could lay their hands on."

"That might have been avoided, Uli; one would need only to empty the boxes and barrels one's self while the people were asleep."

"You 're right, brother, but let 's hurry on now and get a torch of Midsummer fire."

And they reached the meadow safely.

By still another route a group of men were ascending the hill. Among them—and he towered above the rest—was Wahnfred. He thrust his stick into the earth as he walked, taking no part in the conversation in which the others were excitedly engaged. One of the men had a clean-shaven face and wore a new hat. He was leading the conversation, at which art he seemed something of an expert. He followed an occupation rare in those days. Years before the people of Trawies had availed themselves of the opportunity to secure a lay-brother from the monastery. He became the school-master of Trawies and educated the children in the manner required of him.

"Men of Trawies!" he cried, pausing in his walk. "Men of Trawies! I, the old teacher, who have educated your children and have stood by you in friendship according to my ability and my experience—I would advise you not to provoke our master!

He is our protector and spiritual guide, and he is placed here by the highest authority."

"Schoolmaster, this time we know better," interrupted Gallo Weissbucher, the fire guardian, who the year before had sacrificed his house to save the ancestral fire; "it is unjust to say that we provoke our master. We do only that which the people of Trawies have done for a hundred years and more. It cannot harm us to hold in reverence the memory of our forefathers, and to guard as a sacred legacy the rites and customs which were dear to them. Those are the chains that bind us to our ancestors who have sown and suffered for their posterity. It does not concern our bodies, transmitted to us by them, but our souls, developed in us by their long and varied experience. We will not have these souls dyed and turned, as you dye and turn your old hat, worn to-day by the master, to-morrow by the slave. The tree will grow by itself, and if one now endeavours to change us by force, it would be like separating the tree from its roots and replanting the trunk in the soil. We are willing, however, to do for our master all that is just and much that is unjust."

"It is no longer a question of the cursed Midsummer Festival."

"Scold all you will, schoolmaster, but on a few points I must set you right. The priest is not our protector—that is the Emperor. Nor is he our spiritual guide, for his conduct is far too worldly. Money! money! the bells in the tower ring out for him. And when you say at the end that he is

placed here by the highest authority, then, with your permission, you utter a piece of nonsense. Our superior is not the monastery nor its patriarch. They should recall this priest and at once. That is the best advice we have to give!"

"Gallo Weissbacher," replied the schoolmaster, "you, an old man, and so hot tempered! Have you not yet learned Christian meekness?"

"Not from our priest."

"Do you wish then to rebel against the rulers of the Empire? The Bishop has for sometime been dissatisfied with the parish of Trawies, and he well knows why he has placed such a strict master over you. I am an old man, a native of Trawies, and I will stand by you as long as I live. It is just for that reason that I give you this sincere advice: You are the weak ones; yield with Christian submission, that peace may once more reign in our green woods."

"Then I should like to know why you are wearing out your old feet climbing up to the Wildwiese!"

"Because to-day, for the first time, I have heard what the people are planning to do up there, and because I wish to warn them—warn and beg of them to disperse as soon and as quietly as possible. I say to you: do not become rebels! Whoever arouses the anger of a priest must suffer for it. Nor should one trifle with a priest's blessings."

"Curse him! Priests always bless themselves first."

"Oh, *mein lieber Gott!*" sighed the schoolmaster.

"What are you thinking of?"

“ I hardly know, but I feel some great misfortune in the air.”

The conversation then became general for awhile. Only Wahnfred was silent and walked along morosely, striking his stick upon the ground with every step.

And they reached the meadow safely.

On the same morning, just at sunrise, a lad was walking along the banks of the Trach. He was a beautiful boy. “ The sun had shone upon him scarce twelve years, his fine, soft, curly hair was golden; the blue sky and morning star are most lovely to look upon, but when I gaze into the depths of this boy’s eyes, I find something more indescribably beautiful. The whitest of the fleecy clouds above is not so pure as his brow and neck; the morning red glows less brightly than his cheeks, when excited by childish pleasure.” Such is the description of the lad in the old chronicle, which to the narrator of this story is an invaluable source.

The boy had perhaps started thus early to school, or had wished to be present in the graveyard when the grandfathers and great-grandfathers were being wakened; he had many questions to ask them about the eagles in Trawies in former times, for now they were nowhere to be seen. The schoolhouse was closed and the graveyard deserted, but an old man sitting under the oak-trees said, “ They have all gone up to the meadows, everyone.”

So the boy wandered again along by the river, a cool, moist breeze fanning his cheeks as he walked.

He searched for trout, and he frightened the wag-tails from one willow branch to another, his wonderful eyes glowing as he gazed after the little creatures. In the midst of these pleasures of the chase he heard a piteous wailing. He looked in all directions, but the roaring of the water nearly drowned the voice. Then he discovered a child lying on her face in the middle of a narrow bridge, clinging tightly to it and weeping.

The boy sprang at once upon the bridge, where the little creature—it was a girl of eight or nine years—was crying piteously: “ I ’m falling! I ’m falling! ”

“ Thou wilt not fall,” said the boy, “ get up and hold fast to me.”

“ I ’m falling, I ’m falling!” sobbed the child, holding still more firmly to the old tree-trunk that formed the bridge, and beneath which the Trach was dashing over huge rocks, foaming and roaring. Even the boy grew dizzy and reached after some support. He turned his eyes away from the rushing water and seizing the child with both arms, he tore her loose from the log and sprang with his treasure across to the opposite shore.

When she found herself upon the grass, the girl raised her little head, brushed back the brown locks of hair from her face with her small hands, her eyes beaming with surprise and pleasure.

“ What wast thou doing on the bridge—so early ? ” said the boy.

“ I was afraid of falling,” she answered.

“ But why didst thou climb up there ? ”

“ Because I wanted to follow my father.”

“ Where dost thou live ? ”

“ Yonder, where thou seest that white spot.”

And she pointed towards a newly built house, gleaming among the charred trees at the foot of the mountain on the other side of the river. It was the house of Gallo Weissbucher, which had been rebuilt for him.

“ Where is thy father ? ” asked the boy, with an anxious, tender look at the delicate little creature sitting before him on the ground, gazing with so much confidence into his face.

“ My father has gone up the mountain.”

“ What mountain ? ”

“ I don't know.”

“ What is he doing up there ? ”

“ Lighting the fire.”

“ Oh, I know now. If thou wouldst like to go up, I will go with thee.”

“ Shall we have to cross a bridge ? ”

“ No, it is up-hill all the way. Why didst thou lie down on the bridge ? ”

“ Because it went round and round, and then flew away with me.”

“ Look, look it is coming! See, it is coming now!” whispered the lad excitedly, turning his face towards the distant heights, above which appeared the disk of the sun. A warm, ruddy glow suddenly filled the valley and the trees cast sharp shadows upon the golden earth.

The girl did not look at the sun, it was too bright for her; she looked into the face of the boy and her

eyes were comforted. And as he turned to witness her pleasure at the glorious sight, his gaze rested upon her and he said softly: "How beautiful is the Midsummer sun!"

Yes, it was beautiful! It suffused the little round face of the girl with the loveliest, most delicate pink. "And two violets grew in this garden of roses," says the chronicle. But how can one compare a human eye with flowers! This wonder of wonders is incomparable. Let the reader think of the most beautiful eyes that he has ever seen in a child, and possibly they might approach in beauty the luminous stars which shone softly like "violets in this garden of roses." In the girl's eyes were reflected the sun's orb and the boy's curly head, which bent so low over the little face that it finally shut out the light from the tiny mirrors.

Imagining that they heard a sound in the distance, the boy said: "That is the music up on the Wildwiese. We must hurry."

And they continued their climbing. After a little the boy stopped again. "Dost thou know how it is?"

"What?" asked the little girl.

"How the sun flies up and down. The good God and the evil one are playing ball with it. And that is the sun ball. Now it falls into God's hands and it is day; then it falls into the hands of the evil one and it is night. My father says that on Midsummer Day the devil throws the ball to the highest point in the sky, and if the time should ever come when God failed to catch it, it would fall to

the lowest depths and there would be no more day."

The girl made no reply, but clung timidly to the boy. They walked hand in hand, cautiously picking their way and pointing out to each other the smooth places on the rough, stony path, which at last ceased altogether and they found themselves in the high heather, the girl's head barely reaching to the top. The boy walked ahead, stamping down the weeds as best he could; now and then he picked a ripe berry and put it into the little girl's mouth. Then the way grew almost impassable. The children became entangled in a thicket of juniper bushes and extricated themselves with difficulty, for the thorns were prickly, but neither spoke a word. The boy knew now that he had lost his path; that troubled them little, however, for they were aiming for the Wildwiese, and that this was not far away they were convinced by the music, which grew more and more distinct. Perceiving that the girl could scarcely move in the wild, prickly underbrush, the boy turned and said: "See here, little one, this is the road to heaven!"

"To heaven?" she cried, stopping in astonishment.

"Yes, because it is so thorny."

"Why is the path to heaven thorny?"

"It is thorny, because—why, I don't know myself. I will ask my father. And didst thou know that lightning never strikes a juniper-tree? When our Blessed Lady took flight into Egypt with the Holy Child a terrible thunderstorm arose, and our

Lady took refuge under a juniper-tree, which since then no lightning ever strikes."

"Oh, dear," sighed the little maid, "if we were only with my father!"

At last they approached the Wildwiese; they heard the screaming and singing of the people and the roaring of the waterfall. They stood close beside each other listening, and the boy said: "When thou seest thy father, thou wilt leave me and I shall be alone."

"Then thou must call me and I will come to thee again," replied the child.

"How can I call thee when I do not know thy name?"

"My name is Sela."

"And mine is Erlefried."

The children then separated to look for their fathers.

They found them standing under an oak-tree, scolding Little Baumhackel, who should have been at this moment lying ill at the point of death over in the Gestade, and who had sent for the priest to bring him a remedy to lighten his last hours of physical pain as well as to assure him everlasting life. This Little Baumhackel, for whom the priest would have been only too glad to make hell hot, as he was always the quintessence of mischief and evil. this Little Baumhackel, with his broad shoulders, his bushy beard, and cone-shaped head, covered by a ragged woollen cap, now stood gnashing his teeth.

"Oh, you scoundrel!" cried the fire guardian,

“ you sent for the priest to come to you and why did you not stay at home ? ”

“ Because it was so stupid lying there so long.”

“ When he discovers that he has been fooled by you, he will curse your house and come straight up here to the Wildwiese. Then we shall have the devil to pay. And what but your foolishness will be the cause ? ”

“ Don't get excited, father fire guardian,” replied Little Baumhackel; “ the old pauper Lull is lying in my bed and is so kind as to die in my place. He won't have much trouble doing it either; truly, now, Lull has been dying since yesterday.”

“ Silence! Silence!” whispered the forest keeper from his house. The reason for this warning was soon discovered. The priest was there. Suddenly he appeared in their midst, and with the utmost composure inquired for the fire guardian.

Leaning with great dignity on his staff and with earnest mien, he approached Weissbucher, who came forward a little to meet him, respectfully doffing his hat.

“ Stop that,” said the priest; “ why should you take off your hat to a Catholic priest? You are nothing but heathen. You have chosen a nice way to assemble for your carousal, for your witches' Sabbath. Dancing and feasting are quite fitting for a devil's holiday. Ha, they are already beginning it over there! ”

He pointed to the feast spread before the company, to the wild circle of dancers whirling madly about upon the moss-covered ground. They were

screaming and shouting, but amid the roar of the neighbouring waterfall not a word could be understood.

“ Oh, oh, you modest maidens, dance away ! ”

“ There is no harm in it, sir. ”

“ When Chastity dances, she dances in glass slippers. So it is here on the Wildwiese that you brew your sins and crimes ! ” remarked the priest in a voice of suppressed rage.

“ Sir, ” replied the fire guardian, “ you have long been aware that the people of Trawies will not give up their old customs, and that the more obstacles you place in their way, all the more firmly will they cling to them. ”

“ Very good, we shall soon see, my beloved Trawiesers, who is the stronger. You are sly, I too can be sly. While on my way to the Gestade, it occurred to me at the right moment that I should probably be needed up here more than down there—so I turned back. I have resolved either to bend or break you. I am your master ! ”

“ God pity the man who must be taught by his slaves ! ” said Weissbucher angrily.

“ You blinded ones ! ” cried the priest. “ Be thankful to God that I am doing my priestly duty. ” He had raised his arm, but let it fall again.

Little Baumhackel had already disappeared behind a tree, and now his brother, the forest keeper, stepped forward, saying boldly: “ Your priestly duty ? Sir, that word cannot be associated with you. Who was to-day summoned to go over to the Gestade to a dying man ? ”

“ The dying will take care of themselves. My duty calls me to the living who are on their way to hell.”

At these words of Herr Franciscus, Wahnfred approached and said: “ Were you not told that a man was lying at the point of death and desired to see you ? ”

“ He who does not heed the priest during life may do without him when dying. ”

“ But, priest, have you not heard of Jesus Christ who pardons the repentant and takes sinners to Himself ? Do you then know nothing of pity and mercy ? ”

All at once the priest discovered Little Baumhacker gesticulating wildly behind an oak-tree. “ Ah ! ” he cried, “ there he is, my poor, dying man, hiding there and playing tricks ! Do you see, you rabble ? ”

But Wahnfred was not in the least disconcerted by this.

“ Did you know that when you turned back ? ” he asked. “ No, priest, you did not know it and you would have allowed a man to die without the sacrament ! Now, we see what your motives are. We honour the shepherd of our souls, for we need his comfort in times of distress and his mediation in times of strife and his sympathy at the hour of death. The hour of death is not to be trifled with. It fills us with awe even in health ; it brings many a money-offering to the altar. And you are capable of deserting us in our last hour ; you go about stirring up strife wherever you can find the opportunity. You are not our shepherd ! ”

“Send him away!” cried many voices. The priest whistled loudly, and an armed squad emerged from the thicket.

“Robbers!” was wildly shouted on every side, and the feasters and dancers, separating hastily, snatched stones, branches, and cudgels, while the fire guardian took his little girl in his arms. But when shots were fired and one of the defenceless ones fell with a sharp cry, the crowd took flight and disappeared in the woods. One man — it was the pale Wahnfred — still remained by the waterfall, holding his bleeding child on one arm. The other he raised, and, shaking his fist at the priest, who stood surrounded by his bailiffs, he cried with a hoarse voice: “Priest, you have wounded my child. That shall be recorded against you in blood!”

CHAPTER IV

STRANGE times now descended upon Trawies. A feeling of suppressed excitement filled all hearts; there was neither work-day nor holiday. Instead of working, the men skulked about from house to house, or stood in groups talking in low voices. On Sundays the church was almost empty and the few worshippers present suffered the penalty, for the sermons which the preacher hurled down upon his audience were heavy, each word like a block of stone—but they failed in their effect.

Herr Franciscus did not dream, however, what the people were praying for during mass. They were imploring God to take this tyrant from them and to replace him with a true priest, such as they had had before and such as other parishes now enjoyed. They felt that the bloodless sacrifice at the altar had almost come to be a bloody one, and that the priest was a Pharisee, a tormentor, and a malefactor in one; and as if Christ's body in the sacred wafer were in ungodly hands.

A whispering and questioning went from mouth to mouth, asking if the answer had not yet arrived. For they had sent a petition to the Church and civil authorities, begging that the priest might be re-

moved. He was better fitted for any other parish than for that of Trawies. He was not well disposed towards the poor forest people; he was a hard master, and he had used force against them. The Trawiesers possessed a sense of justice also, as well as means of defending themselves, so they begged, for God's sake, that Herr Franciscus might be removed, or they would not vouch for the consequences.

This petition, signed with crosses by most of the inhabitants and accompanied by their prayers, remained unanswered for weeks. There was much conjecturing over the expected reply and the people foresaw that it would be harsh and imperious, but they hoped that it might lead to a change for the better. In the meantime, they endured with patience the hard and inconsiderate conduct of the priest. This only increased the man's severity and cruelty, for there are natures which are embittered by nothing so much as by the yielding and humility of those they are tormenting. He made trouble in many houses, crushed all hope in many faithful souls, and was constantly wounding the feelings of his parishioners by his rude manner of trampling upon their old-time customs.

Late in the summer, at the Feast of St. Bartholomew, an order was issued through the schoolmaster for the parish to assemble in the church on the following day, when the commands and wishes of the authorities would be announced.

For years the church at Trawies had not been so well filled as at the appointed hour. The priest

was nowhere to be seen. The altar towered black and threatening above the chancel; no candles lighted the pillars.

“He has even extinguished the altar lamp,” murmured the fire guardian; “that is a bad sign.”

Wahnfred, pale, and filled with anxious presentiment, heaved a deep sigh.

The door of the sacristy leading into the chancel was now heard opening. Here the announcement was to be read. What if it should be the new priest himself! Every eye was turned towards the spot where formerly the word of God had been so comfortingly spoken, and where of late such spiteful cynicisms and angry curses had been pronounced. Now there would surely be a change.

But in the chancel stood the hated priest!

A muffled murmur of discontent filled the church. The priest, not in his robes, but dressed in dark clothes, remained for several minutes motionless, staring down at the congregation with a venomous look, as though he would charm serpents with his glance.

He then read with a weak voice, contrasting strangely with his face, the following: “In the name of the high authorities appointed by God! In the name of His Eminence the Archbishop! In the name of His Right Reverend Constitorium! In the name of His Worshipful Majesty, the Emperor! Let it be known to all present! The complaints that you have made against your priest are groundless. It is you, yourselves, who, by your foolish return to pagan customs, by your refusal to pay

tithes, by your utter disregard of respect due him, have aroused the anger of your master. To acknowledge that you are right in this affair would only strengthen you in that which we must prevent and punish. The unit must conform to the whole, the parish must yield to the state. He who rebels is lost. We demand of you absolute obedience to your chief. We threaten you with our wrath on the first occasion of disregard of your duty as subjects."

The signatures and seals of the authorities, with date and address, followed.

There was great excitement in the church. With signs of resentment and discontent the people crowded through the doorway. The priest remained standing, his hands clenched upon the chancel desk; his cruel eyes followed the departing congregation; his face had grown yellow, his lips were tightly compressed. Not until the last parishioner had gone did he turn and leave the chancel.

As he was crossing the green towards the parsonage, the people avoided him on every side. Even the aged and the children greeted him guardedly, while the men turned away their heads without a sign of recognition.

"We will get away from here," said a man from the valley of the Trasank. "I shall set fire to my hut to-day and emigrate."

"My ancestors cultivated this land," said the fire guardian, "my ancestors founded Trawies. I will not leave my home. We shall see who is

rooted more firmly here, the native born or the stranger! ”

To-day the people had no mind to leave the square by the church; they grew more and more noisy, approaching nearer and nearer to the parsonage. One man threw a stone at the window, breaking it in pieces, at the same time demanding whether or not the priest would now leave them in peace.

The bailiffs attempted to disperse the crowd, but it scattered only to re-assemble in another place.

Far back in the valley, where the Miesing brook flows into the Trach, is a cave among the rocks, called the *Rabenkirche* (the Raven's Church). According to the legend, every ninety years on Christmas eve the ravens from the surrounding forests meet here to relate weird stories of the people whom they have found murdered in these woods. They are said to speak a human language, and if a human ear were brave enough to listen to the horrible tales told on these occasions it might learn of many a deed otherwise hidden for all time from the world. When the dusky birds have finished their chronicle they hold a religious service for those who have died without the prayers and good wishes of their fellow-beings.

The men of Trawies were not thinking of the old legend, but of the *Rabenkirche*. And it was on a Sunday morning, at the season when the beeches and larches were turning yellow and the birds had ceased their joyous singing in the woods, that a

number of people were wending their way to the cave in the Miesing gorge. They came from Trawies and from the Gestade, from the Johannesberg and from the Tärn, and from the distant parts of the Trasank valley.

As they passed the church the bells were ringing. They rang warningly, imploringly. They called as a hen calls when she would protect her young from danger.

But the men strode gloomily onward. They had become estranged from the church. They hoped, however, that the time would arrive when they might again listen with joy to the voice of the bells.

Among the men were the fire guardian and the hunter from the Trasank, Wahnfred and the forest keeper, Uli, the charcoal-burner, and Roderich, the tramp. Each one carried a heavy stick, for they would not risk being overtaken unarmed a second time, as on that occasion on the Wildwiese. Little Baumhackel was trudging on ahead of Roderich. He was carrying his coat over his right shoulder and was the only one in the company without a stick. It was just as safe to go unarmed, he thought, for if there should be shooting, the armed men would be the first to be attacked. It was clever of Little Baumhackel.

As he walked along lazily and carelessly, a package of papers fell from his coat pocket upon the ground.

Roderich, the tramp, saw it and picked it up, saying nothing. Could it be that this was paper money? Little Baumhackel had had an interview

with a lumberman the day before. He examined the papers and with a laugh uttered a curse. "By Saint Erasmus and again by Saint Erasmus! Yes," continued the tramp in his conversation with himself, "he was the poor martyr whose entrails were taken out of him. And so the Trawiesers are using him as a certificate of confession! Why could'n't it have been money instead!"

It was surely a most aggravating discovery.

In the parish of Trawies it was the custom for each person attending the Easter confession to receive from the priest, after absolution, a certificate, which later was to be delivered at the parsonage to show that all religious duties had been duly performed. Upon this certificate was a picture of their patron saint with these words written below: "Holy Bishop Erasmus, pray for us, guard us in life, and stand by us in death!" And beneath this, "Easter Confession of Parishioner"—then a blank, where, after absolution, the name of the penitent with the date was to be written. Thus the priest was able to keep an oversight of his people.

But how had Little Baumhackel come into possession of the certificates of an entire year?

"Here, you wretch! Hold on!" called Roderich after the man, who turned as he heard himself addressed. "Have you lost something, Little Baumhackel?"

He began searching his pockets at once.

"Do you miss nothing?"

"Not that I know of, unless you mean my lost soul."

“ This here, does it belong to you ? ”

“ It can't be worth much or you would n't show it,” said Baumhackel. Then his eye fell upon the certificates.

“ Have I been carrying those papers about in my pockets? ” he asked himself.

“ Man,” said the tramp, laying his hand upon Baumhackel's shoulder, “ how did you come by such sacred things ? ”

“ I stole them,” was the reply.

“ Stole them! If you broke into the parsonage and could find nothing better than the pictures of saints you are a fool.”

“ You know, my dear Roderich, that I usually set little store by stealing, but if I attempt it, it is for a good reason. When you steal, you confess, as a matter of course. But if you should miss confession once, then you would have to steal.”

“ If you want to quarrel with someone,” said Roderich, “ you are mistaken in your man ! ”

Almost terrified at the sudden anger of the tramp, Little Baumhackel stammered: “ I did n't mean to offend you. As you asked me how I came by the sacred things, I just wanted to tell you why I stole them. I did not go to confession last Easter.”

“ You heathen ! ”

“ It was because I knew a secret which had to be kept from the priest. I preferred going without the holy bread to swallowing his penance with it. Never mind; I am a Christian again now. But after Easter I began to reflect upon what would happen to me when it was discovered that I had played

truant. And it would have been discovered, for my certificate was missing. Then I was worried, and on the day when the parishioners were delivering their certificates at the parsonage I crept into the house at nightfall. The housemaid is an old playmate of mine, and it was for her sake that I had kept my secret; it was she who gave me the whole package. Now let him prove that mine is missing, for they are all missing. I 'll sell you one if you want it, Roderich."

"I manage this way," answered Roderich. "One year, when I have n't much on my conscience, I confess twice and save the second certificate for another year, when I have done something I don't like to tell."

"Not at all a bad idea," said his companion.

When the company reached the Miesing, the younger ones began their merry-making at once. They climbed and wrestled, danced and played games. They were in exuberant spirits despite the solemn occasion which had called the people together. The older men of Trawies, and a few of those whose word had weight, gradually separated themselves from the boisterous crowd and withdrew to the cave. While outside the people were gathering wood for a fire, the blue smoke of which lightly rose among the pine-trees, while they were catching trout in the river Trach, dressing and broiling them, while they shouted and sang and with childlike pleasure laughed over their foolish jests, the old men in the dark cavern were deliberately sowing the fatal seed for a terrible future.

Gallo Weissbucher began with these words:

“ Men of Trawies, you know why we have come together here.”

“ We know it,” murmured the men.

“ Once we too took part in the merry-making of the young people, for in Trawies we all live to a great age, yet never grow old. That is all changed now. For many days have I seen no ray of pleasure or happiness in your faces. And I too have no longer a desire to laugh. Trawies, once free, is now in bondage. And our laws remain unchanged; our spiritual and civil government is the same. We have always fulfilled our duty towards it; aside from that we have remained our own masters. But how is it to-day? A single man has become our destruction; I need not name him—you all know him! Could he but know us as we know him! He came a stranger, and would supplant our Emperor and himself become our ruler, our prince, though he is far from princely. He is draining our very marrow, striking with rude hands at our heart itself. He would trample on our ancestral rights, and is it not true that he is plundering our homes?”

“ It is indeed true!”

“ Is it not true that he would separate us from the customs of our forefathers, as one severs the tree from its roots, only to throw it aside to decay? Have you seen the retainers which he keeps, and the hunting dogs, to tear us in pieces? Have you not heard the report of his gun upon the Wild-wiese?”

“ We have heard it!”

“ The lead has entered into one of our own flesh and blood. An innocent child has been shot, but this ball will remain for ever buried in our own hearts.”

The pale Wahnfred ground his teeth; he thought of the fresh blood trickling over the body of his little son; he thought of the nights of agony through which he had watched by Erlefried's side until the danger was at last over and the arm healed.

“ Is that a good shepherd who sets wolves upon his flock ?” continued the fire guardian.

“ Curse him, curse him !” resounded through the rocky cavern.

“ Subdue your anger, ye men of Trawies ! Calmly and deliberately must we consider what is to be done to protect ourselves from this enemy. Has no one a word to say ?”

All were silent.

“ As you know, our petition to the authorities has been fruitless. To our anger and humiliation the answer has been hurled at us by him ! Now is he bolder than before, and we are helpless if we do not help ourselves. What is your opinion ?”

“ He must go !” cried many voices.

“ In that I agree with you, comrades. There is nothing I hate like force, but it is force which has aroused our anger and against which we must defend ourselves. The men in authority have sent us word that the unit must submit to the whole. We have known that long and we do submit to the Empire. It is an eternal law that any one thing which

does not tend to the prosperity of the whole shall be exterminated.”

“ So he must go ! ” cried one.

“ Only to return with an armed force,” said another.

“ Should he come back, he would find the parsonage in ashes.”

“ And you would be obliged to rebuild it without pay. An enemy would leave to return with a hundred.”

“ What then shall we do—what ? ”

“ Kill him ! ”

A dead silence. Who had spoken the word ? It escaped from the dark recesses of the cavern. Even the noise outside seemed hushed. A slight breeze stirred the branches and dry beech leaves were blown across the entrance of the cave.

The fire guardian then asked in a hushed voice :

“ Has anyone a word to say against it ? ”

There was no answer.

The men drew closer together farther back from the opening. Some whispered hurriedly ; no one could see how deeply flushed were their faces. Others remained silent with compressed lips ; no one could see how pale they were. Gradually the voices of the speakers became louder and more passionate—the opinions differed. The fire guardian at last succeeded in restoring order and the discussion continued. No one was allowed to enter from without ; no one was allowed to leave. With uplifted arms and clenched fists, the members of the council raised three fingers to take the oath :

“ To whomsoever the lot falls, he must perform the deed, without protest, without delay, as truly as he is a free-born child of Almighty God ! ”

“ If it falls to me, I will do it without protest, without delay, as truly as I am a free-born child of Almighty God ! ”

The oath was taken by each man present.

A tall, slender man, called Bart-from-Tärn, now stepped out of the cave, casting his eyes searchingly upon the ground. He picked up a number of little stones, only to throw them down again; he plucked a few leaves from a bush, then dropped them; he seized hold of several twigs, but let go of them so quickly that they swung to and fro on their branches.

“ What are you looking for ? ” asked Roderich, the tramp, who was standing a little apart from the merry company outside.

“ I need certain things, ” said Bart, without looking up, “ little stones or leaves, forty in number. But they must be alike in size and form. ”

“ See here, then, perhaps you can use these, ” answered the tramp, holding out the package of confessional certificates which he had picked up behind Little Baumhackel earlier in the day.

Bart looked at the slips of paper without asking how the owner came by them. He only said, “ They will do. ”

“ What are you going to use them for ? ” asked Roderich.

“ To light a fire, ” replied Bart. “ You stay out here, ” and he re-entered the cave,

The papers were examined. Forty men were present, forty had sworn; forty of the confessional certificates were counted out, each with the name of its owner written upon it.

“ This is a fatality,” said one of the older men, pointing to the picture of St. Erasmus; “ our patron saint is with us.”

“ Amen! ” murmured the fire guardian, dropping the bits of paper into a cleft in the rock. Taking his stick he stirred them thoroughly, then turning towards his companions, said: “ In this rocky urn now rest the fortunes of Trawies and our future. Soon will the fatal lot be drawn demanding the deed of one of us. The responsibility rests upon us all, though the chosen one must perform the act. We all promise to stand by him and give him our support. And when it is done, we will all uphold and protect him as our liberator. I now dip my stick into this pitch; the paper which clings to it, let it be the voice of God! Should there be more than one paper, the lots must be drawn anew. Here is the stick. Who will take it and thrust it into the urn? ”

They drew back, feeling that the slightest voluntary movement of the hand would be a crime.

At last Bart-from-Tärn seized the stick and plunged it into the cleft of the rock.

All eyes were fastened upon the outline of the slender figure standing in the dim light. He raised his arm and the bit of white paper was clinging to the stick. He held it a long time motionless—no one wished to touch it; then it loosened itself and

fluttered back into the cleft. Above in the arches of the cave a sound as of beating of wings was heard. Many a one thought: "Has the lot fallen to me, and is my good angel with a flutter of his wing sending it back into the cleft again?" And many a one was seized with horror and tried to leave the cave. But the fire guardian barred the entrance, earnestly reminding the men of their oath.

Again Bart thrust the stick into the crevice and brought up another paper.

It lay upon the ground; the picture of the saint could be distinctly seen. The hunter from the Trasank bent over and read: "Holy Bishop Erasmus, pray for us, guard us in life, and stand by us in death! Easter Confessional Certificate of Parishioner"—but the name was difficult to read in the darkness. Uli, the charcoal-burner, struck a light and they read the words written in the priest's own hand: "Wahnfred, from the Gestade."

Wahnfred leaned back against the wall and did not stir. He was paler than usual. He had heard his name. The veil of dreams in which the quiet visionary would so gladly have enveloped himself had vanished; he saw a path of blood before him.

CHAPTER V

BY the river, where the valley of the Trach widened, amid the young alders and beeches, a brown patch of sandy ground disclosed itself, over which the Trach flowed quietly in its broad bed. Here, upon a clearing on the hillside, stood the house called *am Gestade* (by the river-bank). It was the most picturesque in the whole region; it was built of wood, and its large, bright windows looked frankly out into the valley, while the other habitations, thickly surrounded by bushes, had their windows cautiously barred and covered.

The house had a high roof surmounted by a little tower. Trawies was too far away in the valley for the church bells to be distinguished here, so in this tower had been placed "the metal tongue that shall praise the Lord, even as the music of a harp in Zion."

The front room was furnished as a carpenter's shop. A stranger entering would look about him twice before asking if this were really the home of Wahnfred, the carpenter. For the interior resembled the dwelling of a country priest. Everything was scoured till it shone, and snow-white curtains hung before the bright window-panes. The

walls were covered with pictures of saints and upon the shelves lay books and piles of manuscripts. At the door stood an earthenware basin filled with pure water, above which was written on the wooden wall: "I am the Alpha and Omega; to whomsoever thirsteth will I give to drink from the fountain of living water."

Whenever the master passed out through the doorway, he dipped his finger into the holy water and sprinkled his forehead and his house. Being once asked by a stranger if the water really possessed the power to bless, Wahnfred replied: "It is not the water but our own good intentions that bless us. Our thoughts and our wills are the powers with which the God of Sabaoth rules the world; and because thoughts and wills have no form, we must place a symbol before us, for the eye must see and the ear must hear that which the heart shall believe."

Could this be a labouring man? Surely he must have been educated in a monastery school or by some hermit in his cell. But Wahnfred was born in this house and had never gone farther away from this heathland than to the boundary line marked by the "Five Pines." He had learned to read and write in the school of Trawies; the old priest, with his white hair and bowed head, wearing the ivory cross upon his breast, the former master of Trawies, had given him instruction in many things, but more especially in the Holy Writ and Revelation. As the old man, the instructor, looked down towards the earth, so the young lad, the learner, looked up

longingly and searchingly to the skies. And when the clouds separated, he seemed to catch a glimpse of heaven itself, with its angels and all its magical joys which fill the heart of the visionary as the joys of earth can never do.

The old priest, who would have gladly provided the lad with a religious education, died before this was accomplished, but he became the guiding star in Wahnfred's life. The boy possessed a predisposition to become a religious teacher, perhaps even a prince of the Church to be canonised after death. But how different had been his path in life, how different his goal! Wahnfred remained at home and learned his father's trade.

When the willows by the river and the clouds upon the heights gleamed in the evening sun, the young carpenter would leave axe and plane and refresh himself by reading the Holy Scripture. There came a time, however, when he could no longer interpret certain verses of the Bible as the aged priest had done. His heart glowed as he read the words of the Apocalypse: "And I saw a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast. In her hand she held a golden cup. Upon her forehead was written the word, Secrecy. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of saints. For everyone has quaffed the wine of pleasure." Then he read how Jacob courted Rachel, and one day, over in the farthest valley of the Trasank, he beheld a maid more beautiful than ever Rachel could have been. On these summer evenings he would sit before the door of his house, gazing down at the beeches and willows in

the soft moonlight, listening to the murmuring of the Trach. But his mind was not dwelling on this peaceful scene. Then the trees, with their lofty crowns, would pass by him in a long procession; he would stumble against stones; mountains would rise before him and impassable streams cross his path. And when he came to himself, he would no longer be sitting before the door of his house, but kneeling before the window of a hut in the remote valley of the Trasank, listening to the soft breathing of a sleeping girl. He would listen until the morning star appeared over the broad forest of the Ritscher, then arise from his knees and return to his home, where the shavings would soon be curling from his plane.

And on one Midsummer Day as the girl was standing early in the morning in the graveyard calling: "My mother, I waken thee! My father, I waken thee! My brother, my sister, I waken thee! Holy Midsummer Day is here!" Wahnfred overheard her and asked: "Are all thy dear ones buried here?"

She nodded.

"Art thou quite alone in the world?"

She bowed her head.

He fled from her. And on one of the following nights he was again kneeling before her window. The air was heavy and close; a thunderstorm was rising over the Trasank and a sudden flash of lightning revealed to Wahnfred the woman in all her loveliness.

In this moment his dreams were dispelled. He

fled through wind and rain, the thunder seeming to hurl down its wrath upon him, but the image was fixed for ever in his heart. On the morning of the Feast of Corpus Christi, as the maiden, in preparation for church, was raising her white arms to bind a wreath in her hair, which shimmered like ripe corn in the sun, Wahnfred, with passionate eyes, burst into her house, crying: "Kiss me with the kisses of thy lips, for they are more delicious than wine!"

"What wilt thou, Wahnfred?" stammered the girl, almost terrified at the pale youth with the glowing face.

"Thou dost not know, oh, thou loveliest of maidens?" he cried, falling upon his knees and stretching his hands out before him to embrace her. "How beautiful thou art, my darling! Give me a spray of thy myrtle wreath to wear next my heart!"

This was the courtship. She became his loving, devoted wife. She listened gladly when he read aloud from the *Swan Song of the Wise King*, but made no remarks. She was like a quiet lake, always pure. She was a domestic woman, caring for the house of the visionary, and the neighbours knew little of her.

In the fourth year after their marriage, on the eve of Whitsunday, as she was sitting quietly by the river under the peaceful alders, she said to her husband: "If God wills, my dear, a child will come to us at Christmastide."

Their prayers had been granted. The joys of summer, the charm of autumn, did not exist for Wahnfred this year. As he had never longed for

spring, he now longed for winter. When at last the snowflakes began to fall, he thrilled with inward pleasure; as the ice formed a crust over the Trach, he said to his wife: "The water runs without noise, the time is near!"

And three days before the holy feast, Erlefried was born.

We already know the lad. It was he who led the little daughter of the fire guardian up to the Wildwiese, where the unfortunate shooting had taken place. Wahnfred had carried his bleeding child home, muttering all the curses of the Old Testament on the way. His wife did not close her eyes for many nights, but she did not weep; she only cared for and watched over the sick boy. Her lips uttered no curse for what was past; they opened in prayer for the future, for the recovery of her child.

And he recovered. The young cheeks regained their ruddy glow, the bright spirit was once more alive within him. He never referred to the shooting on the Wildwiese, nor did Wahnfred; but the latter rejoiced that the wound had left a scar — a debt for which Erlefried, grown to manhood, should demand payment.

Then the day arrived when Wahnfred, the carpenter, learned with horror that the crime would not wait to be avenged by the son; it must be avenged by the father at once. He had taken the oath, and he must now fulfil his duty.

On a late autumn morning he sat before the door of his house deep in reflection.

In the valley lay the hoar-frost, and the oaks and

beeches stretched their lifeless branches out into the icy air. In the light of the rising sun the Trach shimmered through the bluish mist like a gliding silver serpent. How different this autumn from the one when the child was expected at Christmas time!

Wahnfred fixed his gaze upon the lifeless things about him, as though he would learn from dying nature how to destroy life. "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," he read in the Holy Writ. Yes, this is the law and it is good. But woe unto him who is called to judge! He who had never planned a cruel deed, who in the Book of Life, which to him was like heavenly music, had sought eternal truths, this man had been chosen by Heaven in Its wrath to deal justice with the sword.

"Ah, well," thought Wahnfred, "holy is the angel who with his gleaming sword drove sinners from Paradise and now stands at the gate to guard the Tree of Life. And Trawies, our sweet, peaceful home in the shadow of the woods, is also an Eden that must be protected from the destroyer. The customs of our forefathers are the Tree of Life, on whose branches ripen good deeds, in whose shade exists a free, contented people. He who was placed here to protect this tree has wantonly stretched out his arm to its topmost branches. He must die! On the day of the Feast of All Souls, the memorial feast for those who have lived before us, shall this tyrant menace us no longer."

Thus he sat and brooded. The sun was still shining through the frosty morning mist; he fixed

his eyes upon it as though he would absorb from its fire counsel and strength for his undertaking.

“Thou shalt not kill!” a voice from within the house was suddenly heard to say. Wahnfred started; then little Erlefried appeared in the doorway, looking imploringly at his father. “Help me—‘Thou shalt not kill!’”

“Kill? Why dost thou say that?” said Wahnfred harshly. “How does that concern thee? Wilt thou then perjure me?”

Bewildered, the boy looked into his father’s face. Then, clinging to his knees, he asked softly: “Art thou angry? Then I will learn it by myself.”

“My child,” he said, laying his hand upon the boy’s curly head, “tell me, what wilt thou learn by thyself?”

“The priest has given us the Fifth Commandment to learn in school and whoever cannot repeat it to-morrow will be punished.”

“Thou shalt be punished thus early for the Fifth Commandment? Foolish boy, give me the book, I will help thee.”

And he read: “The Fifth Commandment forbids thee to kill thyself or another. Thus saith the Lord: ‘And surely your blood of your lives will I require. . . . At the hand of man and at the hand of man’s brother will I require the life of man. . . . I say unto you, whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer!’”

Erlefried repeated the words after his father, at the same time whittling a stick with his pocket-

knife. He scarcely seemed to heed what he was saying; his work interested him more.

“Thou art inattentive, child,” said Wahnfred, reprovingly; “what art thou making?”

“A sword,” was the boy’s answer.

CHAPTER VI

WAHNFRED laughed a bitter laugh as he perceived in his own child how one may learn the Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill!" while forging a sword. Such is human nature; it was ever thus and always will be. The hand commits a crime and the lips pronounce judgment. Or is it the contrary? Do the lips commit the crime? Does the hand pronounce judgment?

An order had been issued that the autumn tithes of grain should be delivered at the parsonage. Wahnfred had killed a pig and sent a fine piece of the smoked meat to the priest. That would be one way to send death into his house; it flashed through his brain like lightning; but he quickly cast the thought from him.

Just at this time a hunt was taking place in the forest. The peasants of Trawies had been engaged as beaters, some of them being allowed to carry rifles to kill any wolves or bears that might be about. Wahnfred was also called upon and received his gun with the rest. A few gentlemen had come over from the monastery and Herr Franciscus was their constant companion. The people were greatly surprised to see how friendly and polite the priest could

be—as harmless as a dove. “Were he only half as kind with his parishioners, they would worship him,” said one of the beaters.

“He is far too humble to allow himself to be worshipped,” ironically remarked another; “he deserves to be flogged.”

The men who thus spoke knew nothing of the compact in the Rabenkirche.

But all the more constantly did Wahnfred think of it, as, concealed in the thicket, he saw through the branches the priest standing by a larch-tree hardly twenty feet away from him. He was quite alone, waiting with cocked gun for the herd of deer which had been discovered upon the other side of the ravine. Distant sounds from the beaters and dogs re-echoed through the woods. Wahnfred saw how Herr Franciscus was trembling with passion, the eye of the hunter glowing again with the same fire as on that Midsummer Day upon the Wildwiese, when he had ordered his bailiffs to shoot upon the crowd.

And Wahnfred’s fingers also moved convulsively upon his trigger—for he too had made many a good shot in his day.

“Even should a deer appear,” he thought, “I may only shoot beasts of prey. Beasts of prey? That was the priest’s order. Ah, is that not a fine large wolf standing yonder? No, it is a fox in sheep’s clothing, disguised as a shepherd. And he leads his lambs into the forest to destroy them. Hold still, brute!” and Wahnfred began to aim—“how often hast thou preached to us of the last

judgment when our tithes were not fully paid! Before there is time to say the Lord's Prayer, shalt thou stand before the judgment seat thyself. I would that thou mightest pray the Lord's Prayer. I have undertaken to send thee out of the world, but to send thee to the lowest depths of hell—and thou wouldst go straight to the very lowest—that I would not do. Eternity is horribly long! When I saw my bleeding child I could have set all the nine and ninety devils loose upon thee, and it would have given me great joy could they have torn thee in pieces before my eyes. But to burn in the everlasting fire—that! Knave! I pity thee, and I will let thee off until a day when thy soul is better prepared."

A shot was fired—by the priest. A large stag plunged and fell upon the ground.

Wahnfred's gun was still loaded. On the homeward way, as the peasants were carrying the rich booty upon a litter of branches and as the hunting horn resounded amid the gay laughter of the hunters, Bart-from-Tärn, who was walking beside Wahnfred, gave him a long, questioning look.

With a nod, Wahnfred replied: "Give me time."

A few days later Erlefried brought word home from school that the priest had not yet asked them about the Fifth Commandment, for he was lying ill in bed, having caught the fever which was raging in the valley of the Trasank.

This news made Wahnfred thoughtful. "If our hard master should fall a sacrifice to his calling, then am I free, then are we all free. But is it just

to hate a man who goes to destruction while fulfilling his duty? Never, Wahnfred, never!"

The report was soon circulated—the people were telling it with a shudder of joy—that the pestilence had broken out in the parsonage. The housemaid had died, the housekeeper had fled, the priest was lying very ill.

The hand of an avenging God. "Mine is the vengeance!" saith the Lord. "Yet," thought Wahnfred, "if the maid is dead and the housekeeper has deserted, who will be by him in his last hour? He is a poor, unfortunate man, after all, and dying is no child's play. Who will close his eyes for him?"

And he took the road to Trawies. As he was passing Baumhackel's house, the latter called out to him: "Are you going to the tavern, Wahnfred?"

He made no reply.

Upon the bridge where the Johannesbach flows into the Trach, Wahnfred met Firnerhans, one of the oldest men of the parish.

"Where to in such haste?"

Stepping close to him, Wahnfred whispered: "To the parsonage to close the priest's eyes for him."

They shook hands and each went his own way.

"He is clever," said Firnerhans to himself; "he is taking advantage of the favourable opportunity. Death has already entered the house; now he is going to shut it in until the victim is sacrificed."

The square by the church at Trawies, where the

people were usually seen bustling about, was to-day empty. The sacristan was not at home. Only a half-witted workman from Firnerhans' farm was standing there, his large hands thrust into his trousers' pockets, staring fixedly at the church and the man passing by. He puffed and wheezed, for he had two enormous growths upon his neck, which had given him the name, "Three-Headed Osel." He smiled in a friendly way at Wahnfred, and pointed towards the parsonage. With a sorrowful expression, he laid his cheek in his hand, imitating one asleep. He was evidently the only one left in charge of the sick man; and it seemed impossible even for him to gain access to the priest, for the parsonage was locked. Wahnfred knocked long and loudly, but no one came to open. From within he could hear nothing but the ticking of the clock and it seemed to him, once—twice—a terrified groan.

"If such is the state of affairs, I shall be no longer needed," he murmured, his face growing pale. "All human aid has been cut off from him. Are there still human beings in Trawies? Yonder on the churchyard wall towers the cross. Do we not assemble there and pray, 'Do good unto those that hate you'? Yes, he has been a hard man, but can an enemy be so great that one could be capable of refusing him a last draught of water in his death agony? If thy brother has sinned against thee, go and reproach him with it between thee and himself alone. Yes, I will tell him how deeply he has sinned, how he, as a priest of God, has de-

stroyed love in our parish and aroused hate. And then, I will pardon him."

Since that moment in the thicket when he had aimed at the priest and had then been overcome by pity for him, he had no longer felt that bitter hatred for the man. The few days now remaining for Herr Franciscus to live should be a gift from Wahnfred; he thus stood towards him as a kind of guardian angel, and from this relationship arose a sympathy for the hated priest.

As the door could not be opened, he went around the house to see where he could best effect an entrance. At the back, where the stalls connected with the main building, and where the uncared-for animals were piteously calling for food, he climbed up the wall to an open window. He climbed rapidly, like a bloodthirsty wildcat. As he was about to swing himself into the room, he started back in horror. Death was watching over the house. Within, in the hall, directly under the window, stretched upon a long board, lay the dead housemaid.

The carpenter imagined that at this moment he heard the gentle voice of his wife calling: "Wahnfred, turn back!" and the cry of his child: "Father, do not forget thy Erlefried!" But at the same moment he seemed to hear the piteous groaning from a neighbouring room. With one quick bound he sprang over the dead body to the floor and entered the apartment.

Two rooms were empty and in great disorder. Prayer-books, playing-cards, dog-whips, crucifixes,

and weapons for the chase, on the walls pictures of saints and deer-antlers, spiritual and worldly, were jumbled together in confusion. The numerous cabinets did not seem large enough to hold all the worldly possessions, for even the tables were covered with bales of wool and linen. Upon the praying-desk were two wine-glasses, white bread, and honey, as though the ghost of disease had surprised the inhabitants of the house at a jovial feast.

In the third room Wahnfred found the sick man. He hardly recognised in him the priest. The feverish, swollen face was buried in the pillow, the breathing was quick and short, broken now and then by a groan; the eyes were open and sunken in their frightful sockets, but they were the same severe, terrible eyes, only more restless, more fiery.

“ Who is there ? ” he asked hoarsely. “ Everyone has left me. Have I the pest and is that why I am deserted ? ”

“ It is Wahnfred, the carpenter. ”

“ Unload, unload ; surely you have brought something with you ? ”

“ I see that you have no medicine. ”

“ Medicine ! The tithes are for you to bring, you brute ! ”

With great difficulty he uttered the confused words.

“ I do not understand, ” said Wahnfred, who for the first time felt embarrassed in the presence of the priest, “ I do not understand how, in your condition, you can still think of earthly things. ”

The sick man turned towards his visitor, and with

an attempt at a smile, said: "Die, do you mean? Oh, no, people of Trawies, that favour I shall not grant you. I must tame you first."

"My dear priest," replied Wahnfred, "let us not quarrel about it. Human life lies in God's hands and you know as well as I what is waiting for us in eternity. The parish of Trawies is Christian and will pardon you."

The invalid now attempted to raise himself in bed. "Pardon!" he gurgled. "Who are you that you should pardon? Jeering at the priestly office?—Heathen!" He sank back exhausted. His breathing grew more and more difficult and his eyes rolled; soon after he fell asleep.

Wahnfred stood by the bed not knowing what to do. He was filled with commiseration for the poor man. He had not comprehended the sense of his words, but had taken them as merely the delirium of fever. He thought of nothing at this moment but that a helpless human being was lying before him. The head of the sick man was bent to one side, and Wahnfred straightened out the pillow, that the slumberer might breathe more freely. He then laid a cover, which had fallen to the floor, over him, opened the windows that the fresh air might penetrate into the room, and finally built a fire in the large stove to prevent the chill.

When the fire was crackling gaily, Wahnfred, sitting at the bedside, thought of his grandfather who had died of the black plague, and of the terrible times when the "Great Death" had half depopulated the country. Folding his hands, he

murmured: "My God, how full of misery is this world! It is not worth while that we should take so seriously the little acts of injustice shown us by our fellow-men. What matters a wound in the arm, when Fate is destroying thousands! Who shall judge the injustice of this world! Oh, keep me, my God, from evil thoughts and grant me one prayer! Only one prayer: that we, who suffer together, may stand by each other in trouble!"

"Water!" groaned the sick man, without opening his eyes, "a swallow of water!"

Wahnfred started back in fear. He who, in this moment of emotion, would have been ready to atone with his own blood for the sorrows of mankind, when it was asked of him could not even hand a drink of water to the thirsting man. Must he go down to the spring, and on his way to the window pass that body of the dead girl? He searched the house, he found wine, he found milk, he found cider; but he found no water until he had broken open the outer door and descended to the court below.

The invalid drank greedily.

"That—that was good," he sighed, sinking back on his pillow; "I thank thee Kunigunde. And now please send that carpenter away. He has no good intentions towards me."

This woman, who had been with him in his days of prosperity and happiness, and who had deserted him when he was laid low,—her he thanked, and the carpenter he would send away!

With wide-open eyes that, however, did not seem

to see, he turned his face, one moment flushed, the next deathly pale, towards Wahnfred.

“ Will you,” he said, “ bring me the paper which is over in that cabinet—in the cabinet, yes, in the second drawer. This writing they must not find. Give it to me!”

The last words were uttered angrily. Wahnfred opened the drawer and found, lying upon a pile of books, a folded paper which he handed to the sick man.

“ For me ? ” the invalid asked wonderingly. “ I do not want it. You must send it to the authorities, but quickly, quickly ! ”

“ I will do it,” answered Wahnfred.

The priest sank once more into an unconscious state. Wahnfred was considering how help could best be obtained here. Hastily descending the steps, he left the house. In a corner by the neighbouring church wall stood a group of men, who, as they saw the carpenter emerging from the parsonage, whispered hurriedly, “ Is he dead ? ”

“ We must find a nurse for him,” said Wahnfred ; “ he needs help. I will go down to old Kofel, the herb doctor, and ask her to send up some medicine.”

The men started back in astonishment. Uli, the charcoal-burner, came forward and whispered in Wahnfred’s ear: “ Do you not remember our compact in the Rabenkirche ? ”

“ I was not thinking of that just now,” answered Wahnfred. “ The priest caught the disease when on a visit of mercy. We could not do it now, not now. Comrades, that would be a crime ! And he will die in any case.”

CHAPTER VII

IT was nearing the Feast of All Saints and Wahnfred busied himself constantly in his workshop. He was making coffins.

The plague had spread and hardly a day passed when someone was not laid to rest. There could be no priestly service now, and the people remarked: "See, how well we get along without it."

Wahnfred had in stock some fine, white oaken boards; these he was keeping for the priest. "He has his faults, still he is our priest and the Holy Order must be honoured."

But from the parsonage no word came.

This put a damper on the friendly feelings of the carpenter. He had found in his pocket the paper which he had been asked to take with him on that day by the sickbed. It was addressed to the high authorities and had been written with malice and forethought. It complained of the people of Trawies as a savage, rebellious, and heathenish community, and proposed for them the severest punishment. The writer demanded a number of soldiers who should constantly be quartered in the houses of Trawies; he requested permission to withhold the last rites from the dying until the people showed

entire submission; and finally he asked that the ringleaders might be banished and their houses be burned to the ground, as a warning to the rest. Among the ringleaders he named: Gallo Weissbucher, the fire guardian, Bart-from-Tärn, and Wahnfred, the carpenter.

Wahnfred crumpled the paper in his hand and threw it into the fire. Involuntarily he reached after his plane and the white, oaken boards. Banished! Their houses burned to the ground!

On the same day the sacristan issued a notice to the parish.

As Wahnfred saw the familiar messenger approaching the house, his heart leaped with joy and he glanced towards the white boards.

“Praised be our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ!” was the man’s earnest greeting as he entered.

“Throughout time and eternity, Amen,” was the reply.

“It’s a long way up here to your house.”

“But you probably bring good news with you. Will you not have some refreshments?” said Wahnfred, placing black bread and cider before him.

“Thank you, carpenter Wahnfred,” answered the messenger, gazing hungrily at the food. “And I’m sure you’ll be pleased at what I have to say. To-morrow morning at eight o’clock the people of Trawies are ordered to assemble in the parish church to pray for the priest.”

“Is he then—dead?” asked the carpenter, in an agony of suspense.

“ God forbid ! ” cried the messenger ; “ he is out of danger. And a prayer of thanksgiving has been ordered for his recovery.”

“ Liar ! ” shouted Wahnfred ; “ you are not worthy of the bit of bread that lies before you ! ”

“ You may have it back again,” said the messenger dejectedly, laying the slice which he was just about to eat back upon the loaf. “ Such a thing has never happened to me before. Perhaps you are annoyed that you have miscalculated the number of coffins you were to make.”

“ Take and eat it, man ; it ’s not your fault,” murmured Wahnfred, his anger dying away. “ If you were in my place you would have no appetite for bread.”

The restoratives and nursing that the carpenter had provided for the deserted sick man had been the salvation of the priest, who, instead of returning thanks, cursed when he learned how the carpenter had repaid evil with good. Wahnfred, thy part of good Samaritan has become thy destruction !

Herr Franciscus, after his recovery, sat brooding in his easy-chair hours at a time. His mind was ill at ease. He felt a still greater bitterness than before towards the inhabitants of Trawies and towards himself. The evil thoughts that had taken up their abode in his heart, what a change had they made in him ! He who had been so indifferent towards religious duties, could yet be so fanatical ! He who had always desired more than aught else personal comfort and pleasant society, could yet be so strict and tyrannical ! It was the spirit of contradiction

and defiance; whoever arouses this demon within himself can never quiet it again. Herr Franciscus no longer recognised his own nature. He would often resolve to make the experiment of being friendly, but as soon as he saw a rough woodsman again, his gall would rise; he could not be friendly with these people, for he believed that they wished him ill. And his prejudice grew to such proportions that even when one wished him well he felt insulted.

In these moods it gave him a pleasure, such as he experienced when killing the creatures of the forest, to wound someone. Then again, it seemed to him that he must revenge himself for having been forced into the priesthood.

It was disclosed to him who, during his illness, had broken into his house, which had been locked by his enemies; who had gently arranged his pillow under his feverish head; who had given him a drink of water, and who had procured for him an attentive nurse and medicine.

“So then,” said Herr Franciscus, “the carpenter has been in my house? Yes, yes, I imagined something of the kind. That explains many things.”

He said no more, but sent for Wahnfred to come to the parsonage. He came and his mood was again softened and conciliatory. He hoped that the severe illness and the accompanying circumstances might have changed the priest and that the obstinate man would at last feel convinced that he was only injuring himself and the parish by remaining.

At the parsonage the schoolmaster and the sacristan were also present, and the thanks which awaited Wahnfred were strange indeed.

He entered politely, but remained by the door waiting for the priest to come forward. The latter, in his long robe, was standing by the window, supporting himself with one hand on the back of a chair. His face had grown thin and was still pale. With his sharp eyes he looked for a while at his visitor.

“ Well, come in,” he motioned finally, as if he would designate with his finger the path the man should take across the floor; “ come in! You are surely sufficiently acquainted with my room; it is not long since you entered by the window.”

“ The door was locked, and you, sir, were at the point of death.”

“ And so that was the best opportunity for you to rob my cabinet ? ”

“ *Jesus Maria!* ” burst from Wahnfred’s lips, and he sprang a step forward.

“ Don’t get excited, carpenter,” said the priest quietly, “ we will discuss this affair quite——”

“ I opened the drawer and brought the paper at your request!” interrupted Wahnfred.

“ At my request? That is a lie! I asked nothing of you.”

“ I well believe that you cannot remember that,” said Wahnfred, controlling himself with difficulty. “ You were lying in a fever and I realised that you were delirious.”

“ And yet you did it ? ”

“ I was trying to calm you.”

“ Where is the paper ? ” asked Herr Franciscus, with an angry look.

“ You commanded that I should take it with me and forward it to the authorities.”

“ And have you done so ? ”

“ I took it with me, sir.”

“ And have you sent it ? ”

Wahnfred answered: “ What I have to say further concerning this paper, I will leave for another time, when we will ask the men of Trawies to be present.”

Herr Franciscus straightened himself slowly and crossed his arms upon his breast.

“ People, I warn you ! ” he said, with a weak but impressive voice.

Wahnfred stood dumb and motionless, his defiant eyes fixed upon the twitching features of the priest.

“ I know,” continued the latter, “ I know what Trawies wishes; there is a deadly feud between us. Carpenter, you have long had the coffin ready for me! I am not afraid; I shall perform my duty, and, without swerving, proceed on my rightful path. He who opposes me on this path shall be crushed! I warn you once again. If you do not submit to the laws to which all the world, both high and low, must submit, you shall be annihilated ! ”

Wahnfred remained dumb and motionless.

“ And you, my dear carpenter, are not to return home to-day. I will teach you what happens to thieves and housebreakers. Seize him ! ”

The bailiffs were there in an instant. Now Wahnfred was aroused; to one he gave a blow in the face with his fist, which sent him reeling backwards; the other he hurled against the door; Herr Franciscus he pushed away from the window with a loud curse, and, smashing the panes with one stroke, he sprang out upon the snow.

Indifferently, as if nothing had happened, Wahnfred walked through the village. No one would have suspected that this was the man whose heart, a few moments before, had been pierced by a poisoned arrow.

“Thief and housebreaker!” he murmured. “By Almighty God! I have borne the shooting of my child, but this I will not bear!”

The sound of thrashing was heard in the barns, but the thrashers worked wearily and with repugnance, for the first grain which flew from each ear of corn flew into the priest’s sack. Possibly it was a slight exaggeration when old Sandhok remarked: “Why should we then complain? The priest does not get the tithes; these we may keep ourselves; he takes the rest.” But it was evident that Herr Franciscus’ sack was not underfilled.

Consequently when the work became distasteful, the people deserted flails and windmills and resorted to the tavern. But even here it was not so lively as in former times; the men sat around grumbling, and the hostess lost her temper whenever a glass of schnapps was ordered.

“Be sensible and go home to your work,” she said.

“ Perhaps you ’re right, but I don’t want to be sensible.”

“ And you, Baumhackel, you don’t get another drop! You never pay!”

“ You seem to think so hardly of me because I never pay, but you forget that I ’ve no money. For shame, landlady, with all your airs and yet so unjust!”

In the corner by the fire sat Roderich, the tramp. He was overwhelmed with the bitterness of human misery. To see schnapps and to get none! The landlady laughed in his face when he begged for a drink—and he was obliged to beg for it; he ought to be happy to be allowed to sit by the fire. He was still brooding over his idea of candles made of maiden’s hair and adder’s fat. He could procure the latter, but the other!—“Firnerhans has a daughter,” he thought; “she cannot be much over seventeen—a fresh young thing and so quiet and good. Up on the Johannesberg her hair would soon grow long. She lives alone with her parents; if I could only get her! What of mine hostess, out there in the kitchen; the devil take her! She is still young, and one would think she could have hardly learned the Fourth Commandment yet, but she has been at the Sixth a long time. No, no, God preserve me from such a one as she! Firnerhans’ girl is the one for me.”

In the doorway stood a stranger. He suddenly turned towards the landlady, saying: “How does it happen that you have so much meat while I go hungry?” and his eyes stared at her as he spoke.

“ You undoubtedly have a purse with you,” replied the hostess, who, having learned wisdom from experience, sought first the money and then the “ Kingdom of God and His righteousness.”

“ A purse!” answered the stranger. “ You people of Trawies are still thinking of such things? I hear that the Trawiesers—as soon as the strict priest no longer stands in your way—intend to have a common purse. ‘ What is yours is mine!’ ”

“ I know nothing about such stuff. Be off with you!” cried the landlady, poking the fire and looking after the roast.

“ You will understand it soon enough,” said the stranger with a threatening gesture. “ To-day you drive a poor man from your house, to-morrow he will drive you out!” And he departed.

In the meantime a quarrel had arisen in the tavern. Two men were hurling bad names at each other, for lack of something better to do. A third man attempted to interfere and received a beating for his pains.

“ We don’t want a judge!” they cried.

“ Only wait till the judge of Trawies comes!”

“ We know no judge in Trawies. And we want none!” Yes, in this they all agreed—they wanted no judge.

CHAPTER VIII

WHILE this dispute was going on in the tavern, Wahnfred, who had just come from his interview with the priest, passed by on his way to the fire guardian's. A few of the older men in the inn rose and followed him.

The fire guardian was standing by the spring in front of his house, holding an axe in his hand.

"What are you going to do with the axe?" asked Wahnfred.

"Do you need it?" was the reply; "if not, I'll cut away the ice from the spring; it's frozen over."

"I have come, Gallo, to ask you if there is no longer a judge in Trawies. A wrong has been done me. You know how I stood by the priest in his illness. He now calls me thief and housebreaker."

"That serves you right!" laughed the fire guardian.

"How so?"

"See here, if I let my spring freeze over and then must go thirsty, it serves me right also, because I've been neglectful. That's as it should be!"

"I understand you perfectly," said Wahnfred, approaching the old man, his hands crossed on his breast. "By God in Heaven, I cannot tell you, my

Gallo,—you would not believe it,—how hard it is to kill a human being! ”

The men who had followed the carpenter from the tavern now drew near.

“ Attend to your business, Wahnfred. You have every opportunity, yet you accomplish nothing! ”

The men then formed a circle about him and began :

“ Do you know, carpenter, how long it now is since we met in the Rabenkirche ? ”

“ Do you suppose the devil will take him alive ? ”

“ Why don't you do it ? ”

“ We understand that it is not easy for you, but God would have helped you, had you only not withdrawn your hand when you reached it out after his throat. ”

“ Did the lot call upon you to nurse him back to life ? ”

“ Shall we tell you of all the insults he has heaped upon us since his illness ? At the thanksgiving service held for his recovery, the church was not filled, and you can guess how angry that made him. A child was born to the daughter of Mistress Freiwild and he refused to baptise it; the young mother has been ordered to walk through the church on Lady Day, wearing a wreath of straw. How the unfortunate girl is pining away! The parish poor will this winter be cut down in their portion of firewood which they usually receive from the forest. Oh, take care; this Herr Franciscus is made of the same stuff as the burners of witches, as the torturers and the crucifiers! ”

“ I know that,” interrupted Wahnfred, “ I know still more than you.” He thought of the paper which had fallen into his hands and which he had thrown into the fire.

“ Well, then, you will put an end to this misery ?” cried one.

“ Do you believe that the misery will be at an end when he is gone? I do not,” answered Wahnfred.

“ It can never be worse than now. The authorities must be made to see that the people of Trawies are as strong as their old trees. There will be a storm, but it will not injure the forest; only the tree which stands alone can be destroyed. We will hold together and fight for our ancient rights.”

“ And you, Wahnfred, do your duty !”

“ Think of the oath! Will you be unfaithful for the sake of the tyrant? Did your mother never tell you the story of that man who was forced to shoot an apple from the head of his own son? And do you know whom he shot? The tyrant!”

“ Men of Trawies, one thing I should like to ask you,” said Wahnfred.

“ What have you to ask further ?”

“ It will happen—without fail.”

“ When, *when*, carpenter ?”

“ May I have until Easter ?”

“ Never. By that time we should be betrayed and lost.”

“ Very well,” said Wahnfred. “ Go home, people, go home and leave me alone. Eight days from now will be Lady Day.”

“ You are right.”

“ But we shall go to church no more. For after Lady Day no service will be held in the church at Trawies! ”

“ Upon your honour as a man, Wahnfred, upon your honour! ”

Raising his right hand, Wahnfred cried loudly: “ His blood be upon you and upon your children! ”
And he turned and fled.

As he was walking over the snowy road, gazing at the red sun sinking below the wooded heights of the Johannesberg, he heard footsteps pattering behind him.

Sela, the little daughter of the fire guardian, was running after him. He paid no heed to her, thinking she was on her way to the village to do an errand. But instead of following the road thither, when Wahnfred turned into the path by the river, he found the child still running after him. She was not even warmly clad, and her little nose was red, while her beautiful moist eyes threatened to freeze together on this cold, winter evening walk.

Wahnfred now looked around, asking harshly: “ Where art thou going? What dost thou want? ”

The little maid stretched her arms up towards his head, as though she would draw it down to her and confide a secret in his ear.

So the man stopped and leaned over the child, who, throwing her arms about his neck, quickly and boldly imprinted a kiss upon his cheek—and then ran away.

She returned by the same road she had come and

Wahnfred stood looking after her as long as she was in sight, scarcely knowing what had happened to him. This kiss had so warmed his heart. Was it not an omen? Could a man whom a child kissed be a murderer? Or was it meant as a warning? Innocence had once more embraced him and had implored: "Ah, stay thy hand! Think of the holy joys of thine own childhood! Think of the quiet happiness of thy youth! Innocence is a gift of God—until to-day hast thou carried it in thy heart. Thou art well acquainted with suffering, but not with unhappiness. Do not make a mistake; the so-called manly deeds are for the most part acts of unkindness and inconsiderateness towards our fellow-men. Remain a child. In danger, and when our passions threaten to overcome us, the child is stronger than the man. Across the wild, heated deserts of this earth winds a peaceful path, shaded by palms and bordered by lilies, roses, and myrtle—it is the path of our Lord. Take it, and it will lead thee far away from the misery of crime to the heart of God."

Ah, how alluring are such thoughts! And how easy it would be to follow their guidance! "Warn the tyrant? Be false to my oath, break my word before God and my comrades,—would that be right? I have not chosen to do this deed; it has been allotted to me; God has called me. I come."

Struggling thus with himself, Wahnfred walked along by the Trach, on into the night. The water was murmuring softly under its covering of ice, which reached from shore to shore. It was bitterly

cold in the narrow ravine, and the wind cut the face of the wanderer. He wrapped his cloak closer about him and pressed his hat down over his forehead. The road was rough with the frozen snow, dreary and deserted. High in the branches the croaking of a raven was now and then heard; it flew a number of times over Wahnfred's head as though accompanying him. Could it be one of the ravens from the Rabenkirche? Had it heard the oath? Was it waiting for its fulfilment?

Wahnfred stepped out upon the river; it was white with the hoar-frost which had formed during the previous chilly days of fog, and it crackled under his feet. This smooth, slippery way, broken only here and there by a projecting stone, led up to his abode.

"If this be a crime," he thought, "then will the ice break under my feet—and all will be well."

The moon was shining between the high mountains, whose steep, shadowy slopes with their jagged outline of tree-tops rose on either side. Pure and bright it looked down from the dark evening sky. And dusky, uneven shadows moved upon the ice behind the wanderer.

"I may not wait until Easter," said Wahnfred, "and I had hoped that he might make his Easter confession first. They would do away with him, and at once; no one cares how it stands with his soul. *Mein Gott*, how often we think that it is only the body of man that we destroy, when at the same time we plunge the soul, if it be not prepared for death, into everlasting punishment. I am a

Christian and will act as such. He who has fallen into my hands shall expiate his sins with his mortal blood and shall then enter into the life eternal. O light of the moon, thou reachest to the very gates of heaven,—say to my Creator that my heart is pure. In the far-distant past thou didst once shine upon a grove of myrrh and palms. Peace lay over all on that summer night and the trees were still clothed in their first spring green. Two men appear, inhaling the balmy air. The head of one is crowned by a wreath of red and white roses; the other, by a wild mane of flowing hair. One has girt his loins with the skin of a gazelle; the other, with that of a bear. They do not disturb the peace of the slumbering garden; they come from the altar where they have offered a sacrifice; one, the flesh of the gazelle whose skin he wears, and the fruits of the tree whose leaves he has wound about his head. He has done it in love and humility and the Lord has received the sacrifice and smiled upon him. The other has offered the flesh of the bear whose skin he wears, and the lamb destroyed by the bear, and he has torn up a bush by its roots and sacrificed it with both the flowers and fruit, repeating the words: 'Lord, see, I give Thee more than he who stands at my side.' But the Lord disdains the offering in anger. Thus they wander through the grove and find no peace. The one is restless from happiness; the other, from envy. At length they come to a cedar-tree from which the man with the flowing mane breaks off a large branch. 'Why, my brother,' asks the other, 'why do you despoil this

beautiful tree ?' ' O, thou innocent youth,' says the man with the hair, ' why should I show pity for the wood ? Dost thou not know that with the leaves and twigs I am going to weave a garland for thy fair brow and for thy pure breast, thou darling of the Lord ?' He weaves the garland, and placing it on the fair brow and pure breast of his resisting brother, says: ' Do not resist, for that which I do unto thee is for the glory of Him who loves thee so.' And when he is crowned and in humility turns his young eyes upward to the gleaming stars, the man with the flowing hair, seizing the leafless branch, strikes a heavy blow upon the head of his companion, who, without a sound, falls upon the dewy grass. The other, stretching out his arms with clenched fists, cries with a shrill voice: ' Is this sacrifice not enough for Thee ?' "

" No, Eternal God!" cried Wahnfred, starting from his dream, " not thus will I sacrifice. In Thy wrath wilt Thou require the brother at the hand of this murderer who has struck a blow at love. I am free from hatred and envy; I send him who cannot work to Thy glory upon earth to his heavenly home, where Thou wilt receive him and show him mercy."

Thus he walked on, the hoar-frost crackling under his feet, but the ice remaining firm. At a bend in the river the moon was hidden behind the forest; the ravine was dark and gloomy and upon the mountain slopes was reflected the pale, misty light.

Wahnfred prayed: " Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsels of the ungodly. . . . But his delight is in the law of the Lord.

“ ‘ The foolish shall not stand in thy sight. . . .
Lead me, O Lord, in thy righteousness because
of mine enemies; make thy way straight before my
face.

“ ‘ For there is no faithfulness in their mouth.
. . . Destroy thou them, O God; let them fall
by their own counsels; cast them out in the multi-
tude of their transgressions.

“ ‘ For the wicked boasteth of his heart’s desire,
and blesseth the covetous, whom the Lord abhor-
reth.

“ ‘ He hath said in his heart, I shall not be moved;
for I shall never be in adversity.

“ ‘ His mouth is full of curses and deceit and
fraud.

“ ‘ Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up thine hand;
forget not the humble.’

“ Thus prayed the psalmist and the player upon
the harp. Sitting at the feet of the sick King Saul,
he entertained him with the shepherd songs from
his peaceful meadows. But when the enemy ap-
proached, accompanied by a mighty giant, challen-
ging some adversary to single combat, the armed
hosts drew back and the little shepherd and songs-
ter appeared in their midst, saying: ‘ Does no one
else dare—then will I destroy this monster!’ With
loud jeers they replied: ‘ Let him try; he is but a
shepherd lad and his death would be no loss to the
land and no dishonour to us.’ The giant was slain
by the shepherd, and how did God reward his
deed? David became king and to-day sits in Zion
among the holiest of the saints. Yet he took no

thought for the soul of his enemy. I will be more Christian!"

As Wahnfred walked, reflecting thus upon the delusive stories of the Old Testament, the valley widened; he sprang upon the bank and was at home.

A ruddy light from the fireplace greeted him through the window of his house. The moon was surrounded by a pale, milk-white circle; icicles were falling from the trees, and upon the Trach that night the ice cracked.

It was long after dawn the next morning, and Wahnfred was still in bed. His wife crept anxiously around the room, but at last, discovering that her husband was awake, she asked him if he were ill; he had slept so restlessly and had spoken aloud in his dreams.

"In my dreams? What did I say?" demanded Wahnfred.

"'The ice is breaking,'—several times thou didst say it. Is it possible that thou canst have heard it from way down in the valley? For the weather has changed and the ice is breaking up all over the Trach."

"Is it breaking?" asked Wahnfred, rising from his pillow. "It was so thin as that! Wife, I came the whole way from Trawies on the Trach."

"*Jesus Maria!*" cried the woman. "That explains why I was so nervous and anxious last night."

"Wife," said Wahnfred, reaching out his hand, "there is a calendar on the shelf over there; hand it here, please."

She did so and as she opened the book at the month of December, she exclaimed with astonishment: "Why, husband, it is certainly true that thou art growing careless in thy religious duties; thou hast not even delivered thy confessional certificate at the parsonage. Look, here it is!"

"Yes, yes, I see it. I delivered it all right. How can I help it if the priest pays no attention to what one gives him? By some stupid mistake my certificate has come back to me."

"Whichever way one looks," said she, "things are different from what they used to be."

"Yes, the times are changed. And they will change still more, wife. Now, thou canst go."

Shaking her head, she slowly left his bedside. Wahnfred opened the calendar, murmuring to himself: "To-day is Advent and the Feast of the holy Bishop St. Eloy. In his youth a goldsmith, he afterwards became a penitent, wearing a garment of haircloth and fighting against the heretics. He is not the one. To-morrow, the second day of Advent, we celebrate the Feast of the holy maid, St. Firmina, who was a Roman lady of great beauty. As the governor of the province once attempted to embrace her, both his arms were lamed by God's almighty power. So Emperor Diocletian ordered her body to be singed with burning torches until she died. It may be that she is of great assistance in times of need, but she has nothing to do with my affair. The third day of Advent the Church celebrates the Feast of St. Francis Xavier. He converted savages to Christianity, was a most holy

man, and had himself scourged until he bled. He is our priest's patron saint and would probably espouse his cause at once. On the fourth day is the Feast of St. Barbara, who was martyred and beheaded by heathen. She belongs to the *Vierzehn Nothelfer*,¹ and is the patron saint for the dying. She is the right one. She will take care of his soul."

He let fall the hand holding the calendar; he lay back against his pillow with closed eyes—he seemed to be sleeping again.

Suddenly he sat up and said: "So be it; now am I resolved. On the fourth day of Advent."

Later in the morning the carpenter stopped a messenger who occasionally came up to this region from Neubruck, and asked him if he were going into Trawies.

"Yes, for I have an errand at the parsonage."

"Would you be so good as to take something to the priest for me?"

"If it is not too heavy. You see I'm no longer as young and spry as I was once."

"It is money."

"Then it can't be very heavy."

"Here, it is paper; there are fifty *Schinderlinge* to pay for a *rorate* on St. Barbara's Day."

"A *rorate*," said the messenger. "I can't change the money."

"There is no change."

"But it costs only thirty-five."

"He never lets us have it under fifty."

¹ Fourteen saints. Helpers in need.

"Very well, I will do your errand, and from whom shall I say?"

"You don't know me? Well, then you need not say who sent the money. Only that someone wishes a *rorate* read on St. Barbara's Day for a certain person, that he may die a happy death."

"I will attend to it." And the messenger went on his way.

Wahnfred remained standing, looking after the man and thinking to himself: "I can do no more. When he is at the altar, reading mass and offering the prayer of reconciliation to his God; when he is breaking the bread and drinking the wine and smiting his breast in sorrow and penitence; when he is thinking of the final hour of the person for whom he is reading mass; and when, with outstretched arm, he turns once more towards the people to say, 'The Lord be with you!'—that will be the moment for God to call him to Himself."

The second day in Advent Wahnfred was working as usual in his shop. His wife was anxious because he was so pale and silent and would eat no food. She suggested sending for the herb doctor.

"Herb doctor!" laughed Wahnfred. Then he said harshly: "Who can force me to eat and to talk?" and he left the house.

The third day in Advent he called Erlefried. "I need thee, my boy." They went to the grindstone. "Take hold of the handle, Erlefried, and turn it for me."

The lad turned the wheel-shaped stone, which revolved upon its frame in a trough full of water,

Wahnfred holding the blade of a broad axe against it.

“ Art thou going to fell trees, father ? ” asked the hoy.

Wahnfred replied, “ Don’t talk, but turn ! ” He pressed the heavy axe so firmly against the stone that the weak arms of the lad were scarcely able to move it.

At last the blade was sharp and gleamed like silver. It curved outward into two points, had a short handle of maple-wood, and the neck, where it was joined to the handle, was of thick, heavy iron, through which a hole had been bored. By this hole Wahnfred now hung it upon a nail high up on the wall.

Towards evening he found his wife busy greasing her shoes.

“ Art thou going out ? ” asked Wahnfred ; “ and where, right in the middle of the week ? ”

“ I see very well, husband, that thy thoughts are no longer where they should be,” she answered, with a gentle reproach in her voice ; “ a Christian surely ought not to forget the holy Feast of St. Barbara.”

“ That is to-morrow, I know.”

“ So one of us must go to church.”

“ My good wife,” he said, “ stay at home to-morrow. Thou seest it is snowing, and before morning the roads may be blocked.”

“ The road to heaven is never the easiest.”

“ Going to church will not send us to heaven.”

“ But staying away will damn us.”

“Thou art right, only thou must not forget thy household duties.”

“When thou art at home, Wahnfred, I am never worried about anything.”

“To-morrow I shall not be at home,” he said; “I must leave early. And as I am going to Tra-wies, probably I shall go to mass myself. I think, wife, it will suffice if one of us goes to church.”

“Very well,” she replied.

“I am going to set the clock right,” said her husband. “If thou art awake, wife, when it strikes one, rouse me.”

“Wahnfred, what art thou going to do at midnight?”

“When it strikes one, wake me.”

CHAPTER IX

UPON the Rockenberg, opposite the wild precipices of the Trasank, stood the house of Rocken-Paul, whose serving-man Simon was a handsome, lively youth.

During the winter, when the days are short and the nights long, the young men on the Rockenberg and on the other mountains are in the best of spirits. The wood for the winter is piled up about the houses, the small amount of grain is ground, and the people are not sorry that Christmastide, with all its accompanying services, is at hand.

On this particular morning the cock was crowing as usual to arouse the men to their work; but Simon said to himself: "To-day I will thresh the straw with my own feet!" and he stamped gaily upon his bed.

The cock was once more silent, but not so the young man's hunger, "so, *in Gottesnamen*, let us get up, Simon"—and he softly ran across the yard to the kitchen, where all the women, as is the custom before the holidays, were busy with hands and tongues, washing, scouring, and grumbling.

And Simon appeared just at the right moment to be in their way. He saw that breakfast was not

ready; there are three fasts during Advent, but to offset this when Christmas comes there will be a feast.

He seated himself by the hearth to melt some lard with which to grease his boots.

“Perhaps you ’d like to be steamed a little?” cried one of the women, spattering him with the wet clothes.

“You ’ll get finely paid for that!” laughed Simon, fleeing, but no farther than the chimney corner.

“To-morrow will be St. Barbara’s Day, when one must go to church,” he thought. It then occurred to him that now, while he had the time, would be a good opportunity to shave himself. He soon collected the utensils. He inflated his soapy cheeks to give the necessary tension to the skin; he stretched his mouth from ear to ear; he closed one eye and with the other looked over at the women, thinking: “Just give me time, I ’ll have one of you yet!” His moustache he left untouched, for, when he visited Liesele, she liked to nibble it. The two tufts under his ears he also left; they give one an air from whichever side they are viewed. Now it was a question what should be done with the tuft on his lower lip. Some like it and some have the superstition that men with an imperial are not “smart.” If that is so!—and drawing his underlip over his teeth, off came the tuft.

“Bring me some cold water!” ordered Simon. And soon a basin of fresh spring water, with bits of ice still floating in it, stood before him,

Bending over he plunged his head into the bowl. He heard and saw nothing, and when he stood erect once more the water was trickling from his curly locks and handsome face, and we will not relate what the women thought about it, for the women on the Rockenberg and on all the other mountains sometimes think aloud. The lad then proceeded with his toilet and washed and scrubbed neck and shoulders with all his strength until his quick panting was heard over the entire kitchen.

When he had finished he felt as though newly born, like Adam before his rib was taken from him. And in thinking of this, a joke of the schoolmaster's occurred to him. "If God can make a woman out of a rib, then every man is created to have twelve women at his right hand and twelve at his left, for he has that many ribs."

The schoolmaster had said this, and yet he had deserted the one wife he had married.

What were Simon's thoughts on the subject? Well, he decided to eat his breakfast first.

As the weather outside was stormy and the wood was crackling so merrily in the tile stove, Rocken-Paul and his man sat down after breakfast to a game of cards. Each one found it easy to play, but difficult to win, for each knew both sides of the cards. It were indeed a pity not to know one's best friends from all sides!

They were playing for hazel-nuts, which in the evening they, together with the women, would crack and eat.

But Rocken-Paul's wife had something else to do

to-day. It was the eve of the Feast of St. Barbara, when a branch from the wild-cherry tree must be broken off and brought into the house. On Christmas eve there would be snow-white blossoms on the branch. And what did the blossoms signify? Rocken-Paul's wife knew well.

"If to-morrow is the Feast of St. Barbara," said Rocken-Paul, "then some of us must go to church."

"There's no pleasure in going to church now," replied his wife, "with such a man standing at the altar."

"I hear that a *rorate* has been ordered for someone's happy death."

"I think I'll go," said Simon, "but not without a rosary in one hand and a stick in the other."

"You're not going to get into a fight, I hope."

"If I could only once get hold of him! He would not even have a chance to cry out!"

They knew whom he meant and were silent. When the talk was of *him*, even the gay Simon could be savage.

"He does n't trust me," he murmured, rising from the table; "there should be no trifling in religious matters. Now, last Sunday I went to Advent confession, and for the third time I've received no absolution. I won't stand being trifled with so; he refuses to trust me."

On the following morning Paul knocked with his stick on the man's door. It was still early and Simon had just begun an entertaining dream. He was almost sorry that he had promised to go to

church. "But," he thought, "a happy death is not to be despised, and I'll stop down at Schummel-Zens's house and drink some schnapps." So he sprang out of bed and dressed quickly. He hastily swallowed the warm oatmeal porridge which was ready for him and started on his way.

Snowflakes flew into his face as he opened the door; the road was blocked and the wind howling. With difficulty he worked his way down to the Rockenbach; by the banks of this stream under the trees the walking was better. After a while Simon began to notice the pungent smoke from a charcoal-pit, which furnished coal to the blacksmith in Trawies. Near by stood the little house of Schummel-Zens, who, with his daughter, looked after the pit. A light was shining from the window.

"So, then, Zens is already awake and I shall get my schnapps to drink."

He approached the door and opened it. A breath of warm air was wafted into his face; a lamp was burning in the room.

"Good morning to you, Zens."

But Zens was not there; instead, his daughter, Han, of the tawny hair, was standing before a mirror braiding her locks. Her neck was bare, a snowy smock covering the tender young shoulders and bosom.

Softly closing the door behind him, Simon remained motionless. She did not turn; she saw in the mirror who was there. How strange that she should have been thinking of him just then!

"Han," said the lad, "up so early?"

“As thou seest. Early rising, early courting, no regretting,” she replied.

“That ’s what I think too.”

“What dost thou want then ?” she asked without turning her head.

“If thy father were here, I should like a swallow of brandy.”

“Father ’s gone to church.”

“And thou art keeping house here all alone, Han ?”

“Why not ? And Simon is certainly going to church too; then Simon must hurry. The cock has already crowed.”

“If that ’s so, it will be dark for three hours yet; it ’s so unsafe at night now, Han, I will not leave thee alone.”

“Thanks,” was her reply; “such a watchman would be much like putting a fox into the hen-house.”

“Ah, how quick thou art! All the better, long persuasion won’t be necessary. I ’ll stay with thee and tell thee something which I ’ve had on my mind for a long time. ‘Early courting, no regretting.’ Thou hast said it thyself.”

“It ’s only a proverb.”

“But it ’s mine. Little girl, wilt thou be my sweetheart ?” Taking her head in his hands, he said: “Darling, look at me!” She looked up at the bold, handsome, merry lad.

“Take off thy snowy coat first, thou awkward boy; thou art wetting me through and through!”

“Thou art right, I don’t need the coat.” He

threw the garment from him, rattling the walnuts in the pockets.

“Hast thou some nuts?” she asked.

“It’s quite possible, sweetheart; wouldst thou like some?”

“I don’t exactly dislike them.”

“That’s good.”

He made himself comfortable as if he were at home.

“A gentleman would ask first,” said the girl.

“Ask?” said he.

“Whether he might stay.”

“You women never know a gentleman when you see one. But I don’t ask long for that which belongs to me already.”

“Thou thinkest then that this room belongs to thee? Ha, that makes me laugh! But I will say, Simon, if I wanted a young man, thou wouldst not be the last—but I don’t want one.”

“Sweetheart, do not throw him away. Despised bread has to be eaten sometimes.”

“Oh, thou little fool; if I had to eat all that I have already thrown away! That would be hard luck.”

“I would n’t advise thee to have more than one, but one is worth a good deal. May I smoke?”

He lighted his pipe at the stove, murmuring into his pipe-stem, “He won’t absolve me anyway, so it’s all the same in the end.”

The cock crowed a second time.

“If thou wilt not go away,” said the charcoal-burner’s beautiful daughter, “then thou must help

me read the Litany, while the service is going on in the church."

"Of course I will, sweetheart; we ought to do that, of course."

"Although thou art a very bad young man, there 's one thing I can say for thee: thou art a good Christian."

"Certainly I am. But let me ask thee first, darling, shall we do our love-making before or after the Litany?"

The girl turned towards him and as she raised her arms behind her head to fasten her hair,—her soft, heavy, gleaming hair,—thus revealing the beautiful outline of her figure, she said: "My dear Simon, no good spirit has led thee here to-day. If thou goest now it will not be too late. See, the others have gone to church and are praying. Thou 'lt be sorry for it, should the time ever come when thou couldst no longer stop at Schummel-Zens's house, but wouldst have to take another path from the Rockenberg to church, for fear of meeting the girl who had n't the courage to send thee away to-day. I 'm not thinking of myself, Simon,—and it will yet be my ruin that I care so much for thee,—it 's only for thy sake that I beg of thee: Go to church!"

Oh, thou inexperienced heart! Thy words were like oil in the fire—for him—for thee. He heard only the sound of her voice; her beauty fanned the fire of his glance—convulsively he reached out his arms and snatched her to his breast. Like a piece of wax she melted under the warmth of his kisses. Just a moment before she had noticed a gleam of

light on the window from without. "The charcoal pit is burning!" she had barely strength to stammer.

In the pit, which was built of resinous wood, a fire had broken out. At first only a dull light was visible, like a blue will-o'-the-wisp, then the flames burst bright and clear through the black roof; in an ever-widening circle and ever deeper they penetrated into the fiery pit, to soar again to the skies. The surrounding trees were suffused with the ruddy glow, the snowflakes fell like trembling rose-leaves amid the whirlwind of blue smoke and flying sparks.

The cock crowed a third time.

"Fire!"

The handsome lad from Rocken-Paul's rushed out of the house. Two wood-cutters were already on hand smothering the flames and forcing them back to their rightful place within the pit.

"Holloa there! Who's that hurrying away from the hut?" cried one of the wood-cutters.

"I'll be hanged if it is n't the young man from the Rockenberg. The girl's father is surely not at home and the rascal has had it nice and warm in there to-night!"

"Then it's no wonder that the pit caught fire."

"Let's catch him!"

"Here goes!"

And they ran off through the darkness and snow of the forest in pursuit of the fugitive. Simon's conscience did not trouble him in the least for having stopped to rest a while with the charcoal-burner's daughter, but if no one heard of it, all

the better. Now, to his great good fortune, he stumbled and fell over a stump, and the two woodcutters caught up with him. With a bit of burning tinder they threw a light upon his face.

“ It ’s Rocken-Paul’s man ! ” they laughed. “ You ’re all right ; you may count on our silence.”

They left him standing. He shook the snow from his clothes, reached his hand into his pocket after his rosary, saying to himself: “ I ’ve needed it to-day after all.” Then he walked away in the direction of the Rockenberg; the grey dawn was just appearing over the drifts of snow.

CHAPTER X

IN what a different manner had the St. Barbara mass been celebrated in Trawies!

During the night from the valleys and mountains the congregation had assembled, the most of them having wearily worked their way through the snow that blocked the paths behind them the moment they had passed. The powdery flakes danced and whirled amid the old trees, which snapped and fell with a crash, and even on the open heath the people were obliged to brace themselves with all their strength against the storm, throwing their cloaks over their faces in order to breathe.

A number lost their way in the blinding snow and wandered about cursing or praying, and on the morning of St. Barbara's Day many thought that their end had come.

At last the people were assembled before the church, stamping their feet, or cowering against the walls, while the wind howled around the corners and the snow fell from the roof and whirled in eddies about them.

They looked like walking snow-men, and their frozen boots resounded upon the few spots of ground blown bare by the wind. Each one, as he

arrived, hastened to the door and pressed the latch, but in vain—it would not yield; the building was locked. From the high, narrow windows shone the red gleam of the altar lamp. The wind whistled through the tower, causing a reverberating sound among the bells.

The hour for the mass had arrived and the people, becoming impatient, broke open the sacristan's window to arouse him.

“Curse you, out there!” he called; “as if I had n't been awake since the first crow of the cock! Can I help it if the priest keeps the key of the church?”

“Then go and get it, you old fool! Have we come down through wind and weather to the St. Barbara mass, only to stand here and freeze before the church? Look at that little woman there; she has almost fainted, she's so cold; we shall break in your door if you don't open!”

The sacristan ran across to the parsonage.

“What's all this noise about?” called out Herr Franciscus from his room.

“The people want to get into the church.”

“What do they want in the church at this time of night?”

“Sir, it is six o'clock.”

“Leave me alone, the weather is too devilish bad. The people may go home.”

“I will tell them, sir, but the mass is paid for.”

“Give them back their money then. I will not risk my health, so recently regained.”

“But listen, they are screaming out there! For

God's sake, priest," implored the sacristan, "they have come this long distance and think so much of St. Barbara's Day on account of the blessing for the dying! *Jesus Maria*, someone is throwing stones! I beg of you, priest, get up, or something may happen."

So Herr Franciscus finally rose and, unaccustomed to exposure in such stormy weather, walked shivering over to the church to read the mass.

Closely wrapped in his mantle, he strode across the square to the sacristy. The people barely greeted him; they only muttered, and someone—in the darkness he could not be recognised—said in an undertone: "The Trawiesers must have great faith in the priestly order, to come this long distance to a service conducted by such a man."

At last the doors were opened and the congregation crowded in. There were even a few miners from Sanköfen present, who were seldom seen in church. Whenever they had an opportunity to crawl out of the dark earth, they usually preferred remaining in the warm sunlight where life smiles and beckons to them, to shutting themselves within dark walls. But for St. Barbara they had a great reverence. In her hand she holds the cup for which each soul longs in his dying hour. The miners, exposed as they were to danger, were often obliged to leave the world without the comforting draught. So the Feast of St. Barbara called them forth from their sepulchral work-shops to assemble here to pray.

The sacristan lighted the candles about the altar

from the burning lamp. The gilded crucifix gleamed before the tabernacle; but the few lights were insufficient to illumine the gloom of the church. The people took their seats, many struggling to limber their stiffened fingers before they were required to handle the rosary.

At last the little bell was heard and the priest, in his robes of office, emerged from the sacristy and ascended the steps of the altar, while the choir was chanting the hymn of praise to Him whose glory fills heaven and earth.

It was the hour just before dawn, the proper time, according to Christian usage, for the *rorate* to be read. This service symbolises the long night, when, in past ages, God's people were longing for the coming of the Messiah.

The choir began the Advent hymn :

Send down, ye heavens, upon the just
Thy dew ! Ye clouds send down thy rain !
Kneel in dust and pray, O mortal !
Woe to all within hell's portal,
For the Saviour shall appear !
World's Redeemer, come and bring us
What Thy messenger proclaimed,
Come and bring eternal peace !

The priest, stepping to the left of the altar, read from the Gospel: " I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. . . . He stands in your midst and ye know him not. . . . It is he that cometh after me whose shoe latches I am

unworthy to unloose. . . . Make his paths straight for his kingdom is at hand."

The service proceeded solemnly and the choir chanted the song of the Prophet: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, everlasting."

The worshippers stood reverently; but there was one among them who thought: "Unhappy man, that is thine own funeral sermon!"

The choir was silent; the sacred moment drew near. The priest knelt upon the step, folded his hands, and bowed his head. All pride, all anger and hardness seemed to be taken from him, everything earthly removed in this hour, as he prostrated himself in prayer and humility before Him Whose sacrifice on the cross he was now to celebrate. Slowly he rose and, in spirit, ascended the stony path of Calvary. Yonder in the gloom towers the cross; the blows of the hammer resound. The priest bent his knees and with trembling hands raised the Host.

The congregation were engaged in prayer. In this quiet moment all were thinking of their loved ones on earth. Outside the storm was raging and the windows rattled.

The priest raised the chalice. The hands of the true priest feel the warm stream flowing from the

sacred wound into the receptacle. He sees the pale face of the Crucified One turned heavenward: "It is finished. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit!"

The choir continued: "And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder; and I heard the voice of harpers, harping with their harps—they sing a new song, O Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world!"

The priest struck his breast three times, broke the sacred wafer and laid it upon his tongue, then making the sign of the cross over the chalice he drank from it. That finished and the cup cleansed, he covered the utensils in the form of a bier. And the choir sang: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them."

The service was finished. The priest turned towards the congregation and stretching out his hands said: "The Lord be with you!" Then pronouncing the benediction, he took the sacred utensils and left the altar. The choir was just beginning the hymn, "Hail to thee, Mary, Star of the Morning," when suddenly from the sacristy a frightful scream was heard, and the priest staggered back, plunged, and fell upon the steps of the altar.

All sprang to their feet; the music stopped abruptly. Some slipped quietly out of the church; others hastened up to the altar with a cry of terror, which re-echoed throughout the building. They forced their way forward, pushing and crowding

one another—but started back in horror, their faces distorted with fear.

“What, for Christ’s sake, has happened?”

“Murdered!”

“Make room! Make room!”

“See, the blood is flowing at our feet! Away!”

Prostrate before the altar, where the candles were still burning, he lay; the head, crushed and mangled, rested upon the stone floor; one hand, grasping the chalice, was stretched out upon the steps; cap and stole were lying near the door to the sacristy, which was enveloped in the darkness of night.

“Who?” cried the shrill voices from throats parched with terror.

“Who is hiding in there?” They forced their way into the sacristy.

The blood continued to flow from the hideous wound. No one dared touch the dead man; the cries ceased, and many, dumb with fear, staggered almost senseless out of the building.

The bells clanged loudly in the tower—proclaiming the storm; and the wind whistled through the trees—bringing the storm.

Such was the dawn on this day in Trawies. People were running to and fro in all directions. Soon, as if the wintry wind were carrying the news, it was known in all the houses: The priest is murdered!

CHAPTER XI

THE fire guardian sat alone in his room; his face was livid, his head bent forward—he was buried in thought.

The door opened and Bart-from-Tärn, Uli, the charcoal-burner, Firnerhans, the forest keeper, and others entered.

“ Fire guardian,” said Bart-from-Tärn, “ you know why we are here. We must decide as to our future actions.”

The fire guardian shook his head wearily, murmuring: “ It has come too suddenly.”

“ Do you know who did it ?” asked the forest keeper.

“ Yes, I know.”

“ Where is he ?”

“ In safety,” said the fire guardian, “ but only for to-day; not for to-morrow.”

“ Comrades,” said Bart-from-Tärn, looking at each man present, “ we are responsible for what has happened, all of us. We will stand by him.”

“ We will.”

“ To-day we are free in Trawies. Now we must be on the watch to avoid suspicion.”

“ Men of Trawies,” said the fire guardian, with a

gesture of dismissal, "come again this afternoon. But go now. The very marrow trembles in my bones; it has happened too suddenly."

The tavern was not large enough to hold all the guests. Those who had news came to relate it, and those who had none came to listen and to shudder.

To think of it! His head split with a woodsman's axe! The very ones who had formerly cursed him the loudest now bewailed him the most and they mourned the "good, kind master." Who could have done it? The church and sacristy had been searched but no one found. The man had fled. Had he committed the murder to rob? No, it must be one of the inhabitants, for the priest had many enemies. At this very moment the murderer may be sitting here in our midst, drinking and listening to our account of the deed.

"He should be hanged!" cried some.

"He should be stoned and beheaded!" screamed others.

"He should be sent up to the remotest part of the Trasank to escape the bailiffs," said one man. The rest started in astonishment. There were some present who sat in silence, saying to themselves with a sigh: "Were these first days only over!"

But what then?

In the meantime, the candles on the altar steps had burned low and were extinguished.

The schoolmaster lay in his room nearly unconscious with fright. The window towards the church he had had thickly covered. The sacristan was

wandering about, telling in the different houses of the dreadful deed. He was beside himself and, in spite of the deep snow, walked as though on wings and everywhere with the same wail: "He was such a good priest!" However he comforted himself and the others by adding: "But perhaps now we shall get a still better one."

Towards dusk in the afternoon, when the people had withdrawn to their homes to await with fear and anxiety the coming night, the oldest men of Trawies assembled in an upper room at the fire guardian's around an oaken table upon which two candles burned.

"The first thing to be done," began Gallo Weissbucher, the fire guardian, "is to bury him. I have had him laid out and my men are now digging the grave in the churchyard. You will all agree with me that the priest must be buried with every Christian ceremony."

"That is also my opinion," replied Bart-from-Tärn, "and the sooner the better, before the news reaches beyond our heathland. The authorities once here, we are no longer masters in our own houses. To wait and see if he revives is unnecessary; so I propose that we bury him early to-morrow morning."

"I trust this haste will not attract attention," said Firnerhans.

"Should we be called to account for it," said Uli, the charcoal-burner, "we will say—what is also true—the people were in an uproar and beside themselves with excitement; everyone wished to

see the murdered man and it became impossible to quiet the mob; the village of Trawies was no longer safe and burying the priest was the only means of keeping order."

"It is terrible," sighed the fire guardian: "such a deed, at the altar, before everyone's eyes! He could n't have managed it more clumsily! We shall have all we can do, my dear comrades, to keep ourselves out of trouble!"

It was then asked if the people of Trawies had any suspicion concerning the affair.

"Upon our Johannesberg," Firnerhans informed them, "the report is being circulated that a robber from the Ritscher forest committed the murder. He is said to have been suddenly surprised by the priest in the act of searching the drawers of the sacristy, and he even attempted to snatch the golden chalice from Herr Franciscus, who, after struggling with the thief, was finally struck by him on the head with an axe. Although the murderer escaped, he was obliged to leave his booty behind him. The following morning he is said to have been seen in a remote valley of the Trasank with the bloody weapon in his hand."

Firnerhans added: "I have told everyone to whom I have spoken about the murder—and no one talks of anything else—that this story was probably true, but that in these insecure times the criminal would be hard to find."

"I am glad to hear of this report," said the fire guardian.

"And," remarked the forest keeper, "the man

might have climbed into the sacristy at midnight; the storm gave him every opportunity, and—I will attend to that myself—to-morrow, when the investigation takes place, a broken window bar will be found; we are then free from suspicion.”

Here the peasant Tropper, passing his rough hand over his face, made a movement as if to speak.

“ Do you know something, Tropper ? ” asked the fire guardian.

“ What I have heard,” he answered, “ and what my man Nantel says, is that perhaps some honest man in the Trawies parish has sent our good Herr Franciscus to heaven.”

“ That is also the talk upon the Wildwiese,” said one of the men.

“ At old Kofel’s, the herb doctor’s, where I went to-day to see about a sick cow, and where all kinds of people are to be found, I heard something of the kind, too,” reported another.

“ This is bad,” they murmured, “ this is bad ! ”

“ But I ’m not surprised at it,” said Bart-from-Tärn.

“ There are no traitors among us, I hope ! ”

“ Out of the question,” said the fire guardian; “ as far as keeping silence is concerned, I would stake my soul on every one of us.”

“ But,” added Bart-from-Tärn, “ the thought which occurred to us might have occurred to others as well; such an idea would not be improbable in Trawies, by my faith! The wood-cutters from Rockenberg, the people from the Tärn, or the miners from Sanköfen, might have sworn to do the

deed as well as we peasants. Many will think of that, I am sure, but no names must be mentioned, else we are lost. It is fortunate that the heavy snow has blocked the roads to Trawies, or the authorities from Neubruck or Oberkloster would be here to-morrow."

"God forbid. First the dead man must be put out of sight, the people's mouths be stopped, the government of Trawies organised, and the stand we are to take before the authorities decided upon; the carpenter must be placed in safety, then they may come,—we shall not fear."

"The government of Trawies?"

"From our own villagers and house owners we shall choose our council, as was the custom in olden times," said the fire guardian, laying his hand upon an old grey parchment. "This council shall be master and law in our homes and in our forest, in the church and in the school, and in all affairs of the parish. We shall honestly deliver our tithes to the authorities, as is the will of God; and of the men capable of bearing arms, every seventh, chosen by lot, will cheerfully offer himself to defend the fatherland. From the priests of the bishopric will be elected twelve chaplains, as of old; from these twelve one will be chosen by the archbishop to be our spiritual guide. This was the old Trawies law which we shall now revive."

They were still talking when a great noise was heard on the stairs. A moment later the door opened. A messenger from the Governor and two soldiers entered. A few of the men rose in as-

tonishment; the others remained sitting, apparently indifferent, but looking gravely towards the newcomers.

“ We beg your pardon,” said the messenger, turning to the fire guardian. “ You are, I believe, Gallo Weissbucher ? We come in haste from Neu-bruck.”

“ Have you business here ? ” asked the fire guardian.

The messenger looked at him in astonishment.

“ The murder ! ” he answered.

“ Oh, to see about the murder and robbery,” interrupted Bart-from-Tärn ; “ yes, it is well that you have come. All Trawies is in confusion. We are, as you see, assembled here to take counsel as to what must be done. We have almost lost our own heads. Such a misfortune, sir ! ”

“ For the present there is nothing to be done but to get out a warrant,” said the messenger, in a precise, official tone; and feeling the importance of his mission, he added: “ In the name of the law you are required to assist us in this affair, conscientiously and according to your knowledge. Let us go at once to the scene of the murder.”

They rose, and the fire guardian extinguished one of the candles and with the other lighted the way down the stairs. Some of the men stole away, and one of them remarked: “ He caught us in our nest ! ”

“ Who ? ”

“ The devil.”

“ You mean that messenger ? I ’m not afraid of

him. If the authorities in Neubruck don't think it worth while to come themselves, but send a subordinate instead to get out the warrant, they won't consider the affair very important afterwards."

"Don't you flatter yourself! Think of the drifts of snow now blocking the roads! If you were the Governor in Neubruck and should hear that the Trawies priest had been murdered to-day, I'll wager you would say: 'In such devilish weather I would n't send a dog to Trawies. I'll wait until the roads are passable, and in the meantime I'll send my messenger on ahead to make inquiries.' You may count upon it, he will come himself."

"We shall fare badly then."

Bart-from-Tärn, Firnerhans, and the fire guardian accompanied the officers to the village and up to the church.

Approaching the chancel, they could see by the red glow of the little altar lamp the frozen pool of blood. The messenger of the law looked about him searchingly and finally asked: "But where is the dead man?"

"We carried him over to the parsonage that he might be properly laid out."

"Who told you that you might remove the body from this spot?" asked the messenger sharply.

"Told us!" replied the fire guardian; "I should think anyone would have sense enough not to leave him lying here."

"Such an old man, Weissbacher, and you do not know that nothing should be touched on the spot

where a crime is committed until an official examination has taken place!"

"An officer would know that, of course," interrupted Firnerhans, "one who has to hover around such places, like a raven about a carcass. We woodspeople cannot be expected to understand so exactly what is the custom when a man is killed."

"You hound, I forbid you to speak thus to me! I am here in the name of the law!"

"Don't get excited, comrades," said Bart appeasingly. "And you, sir, have spent many a piece of money in the tavern here which should have gone into your sack, so you won't be so hard on us if, in our ignorance, we have made a mistake. You should have seen how frightful he looked lying there. *Herr Gott!* I shall never forget the horror of it as long as I live! Everyone who saw him was nearly crazed and they all demanded that he should be laid out like a Christian."

"The church should have been locked as soon as they had gone," instructed the messenger; "within these walls the praying is at an end for ever. What are those people doing over there in that field?"

"They are digging the grave," answered the fire guardian.

"For whom?"

"Why, for—" he pointed with his thumb towards the parsonage.

The messenger stopped short, saying: "My dear people, if you act so independently, then the complaints of your priest had indeed just cause. You have no right to bury even a still-born babe on your

own responsibility—and such a case as this! I will answer for it and you shall answer for it, that from this moment not one hair is touched! There is still much to be done, I tell you. It will be days and weeks before he can be buried!”

Silently they mounted the stairs to the priest's apartment. Through the open door gleamed the light of many candles. These surrounded a bier upon which lay the body covered with a grey cloth. Only the tips of the boots were visible; at the head stood a high crucifix reaching nearly to the ceiling. Praying-benches had been placed beside the bier, but there were no worshippers; the whole house was empty and cold. Not one of the men of Trawies would advance to remove the cloth. The messenger was obliged to do it himself, but he started back with the cry, “*Jesus Maria!*” Even the soldiers paled at the sight.

“There is nothing for us to do at present,” said the messenger after a pause. “Extinguish the candles, lock the room and the house.”

The storm had died away; a cold, starry sky with a rising moon looked down upon the white world beneath. The messenger, accompanied by the soldiers, departed, taking the path by the Trach. The search for the murderer had begun.

CHAPTER XII

IT was a bright, cold morning and everything shone and sparkled. Winter, dressed in the colour of innocence, spread her lily-white mantle over the silent village and over the mountains which soared into the blue dome of heaven. The houses of Trawies, usually gleaming against their background of green, now resembled grey blocks of stone in the pure snow.

But the narrator can take no pleasure in all this beauty, for it is hidden in the shadow of that unholy night. In spirit he sees Fate, who out of that night is with busy fingers spinning dark and slender threads. Through the sea of light these threads reach from house to house, from hut to hut, yes, from tree to tree and from stone to stone, entangling and interweaving themselves into a black veil, concealing the future and covering the sun that even in Trawies would so gladly smile upon each young heart.

Yet, in these days of unrest and confusion, there is no time for reflection. See the crowd streaming from the tavern. Little Baumhackel was in trouble. Little Baumhackel, with his heavy beard and cone-shaped head, the embodiment of mischief and evil;

the Faun of Trawies, with his short legs and long fingers; the active dwarf, with his sheep's eyes and rabbit's foot, upon whose sallow forehead were written as many sins as could find room thereon, and who was supremely indifferent to it all—Little Baumhackel was now in trouble.

The preceding night he had sat in the tavern until very late, speculating with the others about the murder in the church. He had finally spent the night at the inn, sleeping near the stove under a bench, while another man, also averse to the idea of returning home, slept upon it. In the morning, as the room filled again, the speculating began anew, Little Baumhackel's voice being heard above the rest. "If I could only catch the murderer, I would hang him, yes, I would hang him by his feet to the churchyard wall; I would make leather shoestrings out of his skin for the new priest! The scoundrel deserves nothing better. To go and split open a man's head! 'T was a horrible thing to do! And then too in that holy place, spoiling our church for us for ever! Curse the devil!"

At this outbreak, Stoss-Nickel limped over to Baumhackel's table. Stoss-Nickel, a lumberman, employed in sliding wood in the Tärn, had for some time been on an unfriendly footing with Baumhackel, not because one was so absurdly small and the other so gigantic, but rather because Little Baumhackel had once applied for the work of wood-sliding in the Tärn. He did not secure it, but had he done so, Stoss-Nickel and his family would have starved.

This huge, long-limbed woodsman—one foot had been crushed by a rolling tree-trunk—now limped up to Little Baumhackel, planted his elbows upon a corner of the table, and said in a voice so low that he seemed to be saying something agreeable, yet loud enough for all to hear: “Just tell me, Baumhackel, where were you early yesterday morning?”

“I? Early yesterday morning?” replied Baumhackel, squinting one eye. “What’s that to you? An honest man would have been in church.”

“You’re right,” answered Stoss-Nickel, “if it only said in the Gospels that you were an honest man!”

The people laughed; Little Baumhackel, however, remained grave and, craning his neck towards the other, replied: “How do you know, then, that it does n’t say so in the Gospels? You never looked into them in your life.”

“One needs only to look at you, and that I did yesterday at sunrise when we met over by the Trach bridge. And I must say if you had been counting your beads until your fingers were bloody, then you must be a devilish pious Christian.”

The men, sitting and standing about, who had laughed a moment before, now suddenly became silent.

Baumhackel’s eyes stood out of his head; he made a gesture that all might see both his hands and answered, “You need n’t make fun of the rosary, you villain!”

“Oh, yes, of course you have washed your claws to-day,” said Stoss-Nickel, “but you were careful

not to put on the leathern hose, and I 'll be damned if the red spots which I saw so plainly yesterday morning are not still to be found on them."

That was enough. The people crowded around Little Baumhackel, who grew deathly pale even to his lips—and that was more than enough.

In a few moments it was reported all over the village—" Little Baumhackel is the murderer! "

It was scarcely credible, and the more thoughtful men, among them the fire guardian, quieted the people, endeavouring to convince them that it would have been impossible for the little fellow to have done such a thing. But the old women cried: "*O Du lieber Gott!* He looks just like the man to do it. We have n't trusted him for a long time; he 's a bad one, he is! Strange that we did n't think of him at once! No question at all about it, he 's the man who did it! And how he scolded about the murder like a picked sparrow, and all the time he was the rascal himself! "

As the Faun of Trawies became aware that something very uncomfortable was threatening his own neck, he emptied his mug hastily, pushed it back on the table with a rattling sound, and, springing to his feet directly in front of Stoss-Nickel, cried:

" You suspect me, do you, you good-for-nothing! Where did you see blood on me? Perhaps the thrashings you 've given your hungry wives were still in your eye! Because you whipped the first wife to death, the devil has burdened you with two at once now. It 's your own heathenish life, you blackguard, that so set our priest against the people

of Trawies, and it was your talk, I 'd have you know, on Midsummer Day, down by the spring—your talk, when you said, ' That man up there,' and you pointed towards the stone house, so that everyone could easily see whom you meant, ' That man up there, someone should quietly put out of the way and end this foolishness.' Did n't you say that, Stoss-Nickel? Deny it if you can! And now you want to put it off upon someone else! Perhaps you did it yourself!—Ha, come on, come on! I just want to show you that I 've as much reason to accuse you as you me. But I won't do that, because I too met you way over on the Trach bridge. I 'm your sole witness that you yourself were coming at that time from the Tärn! Think of that, Nickel, and keep quiet!"

Little Baumhackel, who had screamed his face red and his throat hoarse, was ordered to be silent. The soldiers had arrived and were binding his arms and placing handcuffs upon his hands.

Then the procession started, Little Baumhackel swearing and imploring heaven to come to his aid and prove his innocence. The bailiffs, however, seemed to have no ears, but their arms and elbows were all the stronger. At last the little man was secured in a cellar under the parsonage until afternoon, when the officers returned from their investigation at Baumhackel's hut with the report that, sure enough, on the leathern hose blood stains had been found.

" Now you 're done for," said Sandhok, with a wink at the little man, as he was being dragged to

the tavern for further examination. The room was so crowded that people were standing on benches and tables.

“ We can hardly think such a thing of the little fellow.”

“ The big man has got away.”

“ The little one will get away too. So much the better.”

Thus the people whispered. There were some present who might have spoken, but their lips were sealed. The forest keeper felt this the most keenly. He decided to remain silent for a while, but he was resolved, before he would see his own brother hanged——!

In the meantime an officer of the law had arrived from Neubruck, and he spoke kindly to the despairing Baumhackel, telling him to answer the questions briefly but honestly and to confess everything frankly; that would be the best and quickest way——

“ To the gallows!” shouted a voice from the chimney corner.

The accused was told not to think of his earthly destiny—each human life was in God’s hands—but of that world where alone the truly penitent could hope for mercy and pity.

Little Baumhackel buried his face in his arm and wept.

First of all he was asked to say where he had hidden the axe.

He had never had an axe, sobbed the little man, only a knife.

Where was the knife ?

That was still up in Freiwild's shed. But as truly as the Holy Trinity was in heaven, so truly was he innocent of the murder. If he really must confess where the blood came from, he would say that he had stolen a fat goat from Freiwild's stall and killed it in the shed.

"What 's he saying about me ?" asked a red-bearded man, rising from a neighbouring table. It was Freiwild, the peasant from the mountain.

"He says the blood comes from a goat which he took from Freiwild's stall. Is that true ?"

"From my stall—a goat ?" cried the red-bearded man; "that 's his game!—My dear sirs, I can say nothing to-day, but no goat has been stolen from my stalls."

"You liar!" exclaimed Little Baumhackel; "or are you so rich that you don't notice when your sheep are stolen ? That 's well for you and for me too."

"I must look then and see," replied Freiwild calmly; "to-day I can say nothing."

The hearing was closed. Baumhackel was led back to his vault, which was somewhat too dark and cold for a simple sheep thief. Freiwild, who was so well off that he did not even count his sheep, won from many people great respect that day. Others thought, however, that the whole story was simply a means of escape for Baumhackel, who preferred jail to the gallows.

As Freiwild was walking home, Sandhok hastened after him, saying: "See here, you might help the

poor devil out of his scrape. Look at it as we may,—and you think the same yourself,—that was a good piece of work that was done yesterday morning in the church. Help him out. Say that the goat was stolen.”

“ You are a pack of villains!” growled Freiwild, hastening away.

At twilight when all was quiet and deserted about the church and the parsonage—for no one dared be found there; even the sacristan had fled—and the bells were silent and the wooden clock on the tower had stopped, the red-bearded Freiwild was crouching before the barred window, whispering down into the cellar: “ Young Baumhacker! Are you still awake? You ’ve a fine dwelling now, ha? I ’m glad of it. But I would n’t have believed that my dear neighbour would steal my fattest sheep every year.”

“ Oh, Freiwild!” sighed the little man in the cellar.

“ But as an honest neighbour I will save your honour.”

“ Do it quickly—to-day, that I may get out of this hole.”

“ Stealing sheep is despicable business, you must know, Baumhacker. Now, just think, a sheep thief! You would like to be free, but you would be a rascal in everybody’s eyes. No, neighbour, I could n’t stand by and see it. A bold, bloody murder, however, is something quite different. And such a one as yesterday’s! That murderer will be respected! His fame will go abroad over all the world and after

a hundred years fathers will show their sons the maple-tree: 'There he was hanged!' No, no, Baumhackel, you are no sheep thief. None of my fat goats are missing."

"For Holy Mary's sake, Freiwild, don't torture me so!" implored the man in the cellar.

"Then you must promise," said the red-bearded man, "to do whatever I tell you."

"Whatever you will, neighbour, only tell the truth about the goat. In the shed, under the snow, you'll find the entrails and the knife."

"That's nothing, my dear Baumhackel, I could dispose of those to-day."

"But you would n't be a devil, Freiwild?"

"As I say, if you will do as I tell you. But I must have your oath first. Another man and myself are planning something, and we need a third party to help us. Can we count upon you?"

The little man swore a powerful oath.

"Good!" said Freiwild; "now we understand one another. Good-night, sheep thief!"

The next day Freiwild let it be known that on that stormy night his fattest goat had really been stolen from his barn, and that a short distance from the house he had found the entrails in the shed.

"But," he added, "I pardon the poor little fellow and I make him a present of the goat. As far as I am concerned he has nothing to be punished for. Another time if he is hungry he need only apply to me."

How the people wondered at this! Freiwild was

not only rich, he was also generous! He will yet be judge in Trawies.

The examination of Baumhackel was thus speedily ended; the little Faun was free again.

Rocken-Paul's household were sitting cosily together around the table, cracking nuts and discussing the news from the village.

"The priest is still lying in the parsonage, without candles, without prayers. Officers come every day from Neubruck and Oberkloster, look at the dead man, examine the blood on the altar, and do all manner of strange things, then lock parsonage and church securely. This year there will be no Christmas mass in Trawies."

"Soldiers are searching through the ravines and on all the mountains, but have discovered nothing yet."

"Little Baumhackel is probably safe at home again. One must look out for him now."

"Is it then true that they attempted to drive away the fire guardian yesterday?"

"Yes, they tried to prove that as chief of the parish he was responsible for the murder. It was no fault of his."

Such was the conversation about the table. All at once someone exclaimed: "By Jupiter, who's that out there?"

A stamping of snowy boots was heard and soon the strangers entered, an officer and a soldier; two more waited outside, standing before the door.

Rocken-Paul looked up astonished. Since his

house was built no such visitors had ever entered it.

“ This is Rocken-Paul’s house ? ” asked the officer.

“ Yes, ” answered the peasant, in a questioning voice.

“ We are looking for one Simon Haneser. ”

The young man rose from his chair, saying: “ I am Simon Haneser. What do you want with me ? ”

“ In the name of the law: You must go with us. ”

“ Who, I ? ” laughed Simon; “ I should like to know why. ”

“ You will soon find out. Get ready ! ”

The young man straightened himself—he was a magnificent specimen, strong as a pine-tree—and said: “ I will not be dragged away like a calf from the cow. First tell me what you want of me, then I will go with you of my own accord. ”

“ Come now, ” replied the officer, “ I thought you would find it out quite soon enough and that the time—when you once did find it out—would seem very long, or, perhaps, too short. I have my orders not to speak, and then probably you know more about this affair than all the rest of us together. ”

Rocken-Paul approached the officer, indicating to him that he also had a right here; he was master in this house and responsible for his household, and he insisted upon knowing why they were taking the young man away.

“ If one of us two is to ask a question, it should be I, ” replied the officer, “ and so, peasant, tell me, please, on your word of honour, where was

your man, Simon Haneser, on the fourth of this month between six and seven in the morning."

"Oh, it's the murder again, is it? If you try to arrest everyone who was present at mass that morning, you'll have a hard job of it and the criminal will have plenty of time to get away. Of course my Simon was also in church on St. Barbara's Day."

"You don't know, peasant, that he was not seen in the church? That Rocken-Paul's seat was empty? And was not your man heard to say that he would not go to church in Trawies unless he carried a rosary in one hand and a cudgel in the other?"

The peasant looked at his man, who was blushing deeply, which did not please Rocken-Paul. "You don't tell me, Simon, that you were untruthful that morning and crawled back to bed again after you had eaten your porridge? It was noticed afterwards that you told us nothing of what had happened; you said something about leaving the church before the end of the service as an excuse for coming home so early."

"It looks suspicious," remarked the officer.

"Nonsense!" cried the peasant, "he never stirred from his bed."

"As you bade me," said the young man, "I left the house and went on my way."

"So you were in church?"

Simon took out his red cotton handkerchief, mopped his forehead, and answered: "In church—you won't take it amiss, I hope, but the snowstorm—I did n't go to Trawies at all."

“Get along with you!” cried the officer impatiently, “these are only excuses. The law requires evidence. Soldiers, put on the handcuffs!”

Rocken-Paul, his wife and maids all gave an exclamation of horror.

“You won’t be so childish as to believe these men, I hope,” said Simon, trying to console them. “I’ll go with them. ’T would be easy enough to get evidence, but I must see first whether I want to get it. Hands off! I won’t be bound!”

They did not bind him, but led him away, the household sending their mournful wails after him.

Simon pressed his hat low over his forehead and walked more rapidly than was agreeable to his companions. His thoughts were quick and decided, like his gait.

“It is true,” he reflected, “whenever a man steps aside from the beaten path, the devil is waiting for him. Now, if I should confess that at that hour I was in Schummel-Zens’s hut, her reputation, her good name would be gone for ever. No honest man would dare woo her. The people would point at her wherever she went, saying: ‘That ’s the girl who gave evidence to help Rocken-Paul’s man out of his scrape!’ And her father, the stern charcoal-burner, would be quite capable of sending her away. And shall I be the cause of destroying the happiness of her who is the dearest thing I have in the world? No, I will not do it!”

He almost said the last words aloud. He was resolved not to betray Han, regardless of the consequences. His innocence of the bloody crime must

be proved by some other means. Every tree, every fence-post would bear witness against the false appearances and bring the truth to light. Thus thought the lad, but he begged the trees and fence-posts to proclaim with a loud voice the one truth, to keep silence, however, in regard to the other.

“ And even if they should lock me up for weeks in the parsonage cellar or torture me with thumb-screws, I will not betray my Han.”

The officer ordered him to walk more slowly. Simon replied that it was his usual gait and if they could not keep up with him they might stay behind. However, they did keep up with him, but one of the men snarled angrily: “ Hurry, hurry, or the gallows will catch you ! ”

As they were walking along the Rockenbach and passing the charcoal-pit, Simon peered sideways from under his hat-brim towards the hut. The pit was smoking quietly; the little windows shone brightly, but he saw nothing further. They had gone only a few steps past the hut, however, when he heard someone calling behind him, “ Simon ! ”

The men turned; there stood the girl, the beautiful Han. She showed no excitement, but addressed the officer calmly, begging him to grant her a few words with Rocken-Paul's man. The officer was all the more willing, in that he felt the most lively curiosity to hear what such a charming lass would have to say to this bold youth.

Han turned to the young man and said: “ I think I 'm not wrong in surmising that thou art about to do a very stupid thing. I know the whole

story—thou needst not say a word; since yesterday the people are talking of nothing else but that thou art the murderer of the priest. I have kept still and let it go on until thou shouldst come to me. But now thou art going straight by, fearing, probably, to injure me, and thou mightest have brought ruin upon thyself by thy foolishness. For someone in Trawies has got to suffer—that 's as certain as that the fire is burning in the pit here—and at last they will cease to care whether he is guilty or innocent. Thou art innocent; there 's no time for me to inform against thee, nor is there time to praise thee for being unwilling to bring disgrace upon a poor girl; so I will declare before God and the people that on the morning of St. Barbara's Day, from the first crow of the cock to the last, thou wast here with me in my hut."

"*Du lieber Gott,*" said the officer with a twinkle in his eye, " what remarkable stories we are hearing in this green forest! It 's a downright pity, though, that such a witness cannot serve. Women are always ready to gossip all the men out of hell, and when it is a question of the sin, the women would all confess it, if they could only have their men back again."

Simon had seized Han by both hands, and he now cried: " Yes, sweetheart, my girl, if thou art so much better than even I thought thee, and thou carest more for a miserable fellow like me than for thyself, then I know what to do. Thou hast offered thyself and the best that thou hast in the world as evidence, but that is not enough for these wise

gentlemen of the law, so, with God's help, I will find a few other witnesses who will speak for me. I go to Trawies now quite happy, and if thou wouldst do me a favour, my dearest girl, then send up to the log house and say to the wood-cutters, Jok and Sepp, that I ask them to come at once to Trawies; then we 'll all come home together and I 'll call here on my way."

"Of course I 'll do it," answered Han, "but please don't think thou art indebted to me for anything." And she returned to the hut.

He looked after her and shouted for joy. In this shout was embodied the hymn of praise to his glorious maiden; in this shout resounded the happiness which in such an unexpected manner had filled his heart; and he followed the bailiffs, whistling a merry tune.

When he reached the parsonage for his examination, the two wood-cutters were already there; they swore that they had seen Rocken-Paul's man, Simon Haneser, on the morning of St. Barbara's Day, at the given hour, near the little hut of Schummel-Zens. This little hut was one hour's distance from the church at Trawies. Simon was allowed to return home.

Although those accused of the murder were always set free again—not for lack of evidence, but on the ground of strong counter-evidence—the suspicion that the guilty person would yet be found among the inhabitants increased in strength. And at last it was even rumoured that a conspiracy had been formed in the parish. The few rooms at the

tavern were occupied by the officers; the apartments in the parsonage were reserved for the examinations, often of the most painful kind; and everywhere in this isolated forest region heavily armed soldiers were stationed.

The body of the murdered man still lay upon the bier, the authorities from Neubruck having sworn to defer the burial until the criminal was secured.

After these numerous but fruitless investigations, the suspicion was now fastened upon a new person, against whom, however, no other ground for it existed than that the man was a religious enthusiast. He was of a reserved nature, and although his circumstances were well known and up to the present nothing unusual had been noticed either in his life or in his home, yet there was something dark and mysterious about him. He had the habit of often shutting himself by day in his workshop, and of wandering about through the forest like a somnambulist at night. He had paid little heed to the civil mandates nailed on the church door, but with the Holy Scriptures and sacred laws of his forefathers he was familiar, and these were interwoven with his thoughts and dreams. No one in Trawies had probed the soul of this man, but everyone knew of him and the officers were on the watch.

Terror and excitement reigned in the house of Wahnfred, the carpenter. Since the eve of St. Barbara Wahnfred had disappeared. On the first day his absence caused no remark, for his wife knew that he had gone to church, and when the news of

the horrible crime reached her it was still more easily explained, for everyone was remaining in the village to gather particulars at the tavern. But when on the second day he failed to appear, she was about to send someone to look for him, fearing that an accident had overtaken him in the storm, when a messenger arrived from the fire guardian. Wahnfred's wife was requested to make no inquiries, but to remain quiet; her husband was safe and well cared for; he sent greetings to his wife and child, bidding them to be brave; it was God's will that he should be separated from them for a short time, but when these evil days were over there would be a happy reunion; only trust in God and keep quiet.

This message caused a presentiment to arise in the wife's mind,—a horrible presentiment that gave her no rest. She reflected by day and prayed at night. But whenever she thought of the desecrated altar of her church, her prayerful soul was paralysed.

And to add to her anxieties, a death had occurred in her house. Wahnfred had made a little hand-sled for his son, Erlefried, who often coasted with it down the mountain sledge-road. On St. Barbara's night, when the sky had cleared and the cold sun had set pale behind the Johannesberg and the red moon had risen over the forests of the Tärn, as the boy was returning in a happy mood from his coasting, he saw a dark object projecting from the snow-blocked road by the river. It was a bent and aged man, the pauper, Lull, who was obliged to seek his bread from house to house. We recognise in him

the same old man who on that Midsummer Day lay in Little Baumhackel's hut vainly awaiting the last rites. But as the priest, instead of going to his death-bed, had gone up to the Wildwiese, old Lull, resolving not to die without spiritual aid, recovered. But now he felt that he could not wait much longer. It was uncertain when there would be another priest in Trawies; and Lull had been forgotten by everyone and the wind was cold and raw.

"Lull!" called the boy; "Lull," he screamed in the old man's ear, "what are you doing there?"

The pauper shivered, looked vacantly before him, and said, "Dying."

Erlefried ran as fast as he could to the house and announced with horror: "Lull is dying down there! Down there Lull is dying!"

They hastened to the spot, carried him up to the house, and placed him in a soft bed; the woman fed him with broth, while the boy stood by looking with his large, bright eyes into the pale face of the aged man.

His sight was already dim, but he murmured with his weary lips: "Now, people of Trawies, the last judgment will come with all its terrors." Then feeling with his thin hand after the curly head of the boy, he said: "May our Heavenly Father bless and keep thee, my dear, beautiful child!"

The woman would have watched with him that night, but he begged her to go to bed. The next morning he was found dead.

Mistress Wahnfred was just about to begin arrangements for old Lull's funeral, when she learned

that there could be no more Christian burials in Trawies. There was no priest and the church and graveyard were desecrated.

How long then must this cold guest lie in her house? Was he to fill Wahnfred's place? Terrifying thoughts filled the poor woman's brain.

On the following day Bart-from-Tärn arrived. His face was so grave that the sight of the dead body in the front room could add nothing to its gravity. The woman, sore pressed and wringing her hands, implored him to tell her what she should do to have the dead man removed from her house and the living returned to it. She was terribly anxious, understanding nothing of that which was now happening. Could he not tell her what it all meant?

"My dear woman," replied Bart, "you wish me to tell you what you already know. Your husband has been accused of the murder."

She listened in silence; then bracing herself with her hand against the table, she looked the man in the eye, saying calmly and in a low tone: "But it is not true." He failed to notice that her voice, apparently so composed, fairly trembled with pain and fear.

Bart continued: "To-day we can say nothing; Wahnfred is still safe, although we do not know for how long."

"But where is he?—that I will know!" she cried, raising her clasped hands.

"He is in the care of a friend and in good hands, you may be assured of that. The bailiffs are look-

ing for him; they may rap at this door this very hour. Woman, you and your child must hasten away, or they will drag you too into misery. The law is no longer law; it is crazed with anger, it will plunge all Trawies into ruin. They would torture you as hostages until he whom they are seeking came forward. You must go with me into the forest of Tärn. I will conceal you in my house."

"Is he there too?" she asked in great agitation.

"He is there too, dear Bart, is he not?"

"Get yourselves ready at once. If we should be caught here we should all of us be lost."

"Oh, *mein Gott*, this dear house! They will spoil it, will burn it down!"

"Burn it down!" repeated Bart, and his voice had a strange sound. "Burn it down! Mistress Wahnfred, do that yourself! This house which your husband's ancestors built, this house where you have lived so happily—do not let it be destroyed by infuriated enemies; sacrifice it yourself, sacrifice it to the flames!"

"How could I do that, oh, my God!" she cried.

"Yes, and something else," continued Bart, his excitement increasing: "if the house burns, of course it would be considered an accident, a misfortune, and the family would escape with one exception—Wahnfred—do you understand?" The man pointed to the body of old Lull: "This would be found among the ruins burnt to a cinder, and tomorrow the report would be spread in Trawies, in Neubruck, and in Oberkloster: The carpenter

Wahnfred is burned to death. The search for him would cease, and your husband be saved."

"That may be all right, but God knows, I will not do it."

"Leave it in His hands," said Bart, pointing upwards, but whether towards heaven or towards himself, it were difficult to say.

An hour later he had carried his point so far that Mistress Wahnfred and her boy, Erlefried, stood in the doorway, wrapped in their winter garments. While Bart was climbing to the roof, possibly to see from the little tower window whether their pursuers were approaching, possibly for another reason, the woman sank upon the door-sill and burst into a torrent of tears.

"Who would have thought," she cried in her anguish, "that such a thing could happen! And as suddenly as a flash of lightning! On a freezing cold day like this to be turned out into the forest! And when he comes, followed and hounded, to conceal himself here, he will find no child, no wife, no house. No, I cannot leave thee, thou friendly roof, given to me by him. God's blessing has rested upon this home; here I bore him his child; by this hearth have we often sat in our tranquil happiness about the fire, not realising how happy we were. What a dream of mine it has been, in our old age to live on in peace in this house, contented and cheerful, caring for my dear husband when his hair is white, our grandchildren gathered about us. Then would we go to our rest, while they would live on under their ancestral roof. And now, with

one stroke, it is all over for ever! Oh, my dear, sweet house, my life is interwoven with every stone of thy foundation, with every nail in thy walls. Must I leave thee, my beloved house?"

"Mistress Wahnfred, submit to your fate," said Bart, standing ready to depart.

She, however, continued: "The dead will rise from their ashes; this house I shall never see again."

"Submit to your fate, Mistress Wahnfred. It is growing dark already and they may come this very day. Think of your husband; the slightest delay might be his ruin. He will not ask after his house, but after you, after wife and child, and you I will save."

He tried to force her to leave. She dipped her fingers once more into the vase of holy water, and sprinkling a few drops into the room and upon the body of old Lull, she cried: "Thou poor, old, fortunate man, thou art the last one in the house! God bless it! God bless it!"

She hastened forth, little Erlefried stumbling after her, half benumbed by his mother's anguish. Never had he seen this quiet, gentle woman like this. He had never seen her weep before, but now the hot tears streamed from under her long lashes. Bart paid no heed to her, knowing that loud lamentation is less painful than the sorrow which is dumb.

The three persons strode rapidly down to the river. The snow crunched under their feet,—a cold night was upon them. As they were crossing the bridge, little Erlefried pulled Bart's coat and

pointing to the Trach, whispered: "See, there's blood running under this water!"

It was the reflection of the sunset glow. Mistress Wahnfred, taking her child by the arm, hastened forward silently, her eyes fixed straight before her.

On the opposite bank they turned into a mountain gorge, through which a rough path led up to the forests of Tärn.

Bart looked back expectantly towards the house that they had just left. A deathlike peace still reigned over the vine-covered building; all at once a red light shone from one tower window, then from another; and now the destruction had begun. The flames spread, forming little yellow rings on the roof and sending their fiery tongues up into the sky. The snow-covered fields and trees in the vicinity were suffused with the ruddy glow. At last the entire house was enveloped and carpenter Wahnfred's dwelling became a pillar of fire.

In the valley was a sound of neighing of horses and the clash of arms. Along the Trach, on the road from Neubruck to Trawies, a troop of riders was hastening.

CHAPTER XIII

THE moon rose at midnight and the church-spire at Trawies soared like a shaft of light above the sleeping houses.

The crunching sound of two pairs of feet could be heard stepping softly on the snow. Two men, loaded with bundles and sticks and one carrying a gun, glided out of Gallo Weissbucher's yard and hastened down the valley towards the Trasank. Not until the gleaming spire of the church had disappeared behind the cliffs and the last huts were out of sight did they stop for a moment to rest their bundles on their sticks. Then one of the men, drawing a deep breath, said:

“ How good it is, my Gallo, to breathe God's free air once more ! ”

“ I can well believe it,” replied the other, “ and you will now have the opportunity to drink your fill of God's free air. ”

“ I realise,” said the first speaker, “ that I must ascend to the Ritscher forest, but you might have let me take one more look at my house in the Gestade. Who knows whether I shall ever see it again ? ”

“ Your house,” replied Gallo, “ that you will—

but let us go on. In the Rabenkirche we will stop and rest, and then I will tell you what has been happening over at your house. It will be hard for me to tell you, but harder still for you to listen. Let us go on."

The sledge track grew more and more impassable and finally ceased altogether. For a short distance only the occasional footsteps of some wood-cutter marked the way, then these too turned aside and the fire guardian stopped, saying: "I fear that we cannot go farther in the woods, so there is nothing left for us now but to take to the river, that we may leave no tracks behind us."

They picked their way among the stones through the Trach, which was here quite free from ice. They were frequently obliged to swing themselves with their sticks from one rock to another, and often in the darkness they slipped and fell. The noise of the rushing mountain stream was so powerful that they could not hear their own footsteps.

At last, this difficult part of the journey came to an end, and they stood before the dark cavern called the Rabenkirche. Here they started a fire, and as the flames lighted up the rough, jagged walls, within which the oath of the conspiracy had once re-echoed, the carpenter, with his pale, frightened face, gazed questioningly at the fire guardian.

The latter then said: "My dear Wahnfred, from out this cleft in the rock your name was drawn, and in this cleft you must now bury your name. Since our way leads us past this cave, it is the most fitting place to tell you. Your sacrifice for Trawies is a

great one, but you shall be compensated. Yesterday evening over in the Gestade the house of Wahnfred, the carpenter, was burned to the ground."

"What are you saying?" cried the other in a hollow voice; "my house?"

"Is in ashes. It will be rebuilt."

"And my family, Gallo, my family?"

"Have fortunately escaped, all but one—Wahnfred was burned with his house!"

"What do you mean by such talk, Gallo?"

"You will understand it presently. While you were concealed in my cellar the devil was not idle; he had heaped all the suspicion upon you and your family. There was no other way to save you and your wife and child but to burn your house and to say that the bones of old pauper Lull, which were found in the ruins, were yours."

"The bones of the pauper! Who killed him, then?"

"Come, my friend, murders are not to continue in Trawies; Lull died a natural death. Bart has taken your wife and child to the Tärn forest; next summer you may see them, but not now. Now you must creep away into the wilderness as far as you can creep and hide until all the spies are gone. I will take your wife news of you, be assured of that, but I must leave you at once in order to reach home before morning. Stay concealed here until to-morrow evening, and at twilight start on your way; you will need a long night before you reach the hermitage, which stands behind the Ritscher forest.

You know the little hut at Donnerstein, where hermits have lived in times past. Yes, you were with us when we brought the last one out for burial a few years ago. Take his place. It is a more fitting abode for you than for all the monks in the world. Carry with you as large a quantity of these provisions as you can; store the rest in this cave until you need them; I shall see that other things are brought here which you cannot do without. But always manage to have two nights for your journey; one to come, the other to return. No one must see you until your hair is long, and your garments and appearance are entirely changed. And when it is safe for you to return to us, you will find a message in this cleft in the rock."

"But where shall I find the message, my dear Gallo, if these rocks should be destroyed before that time?" asked Wahnfred.

"You must not take it so hard," answered the fire guardian. "When the meadows are green once more, I hope to see you here again."

"Man, now you are saying something that you do not believe yourself. Take it back! You know very well, you all know how it will be with me. The meadows will be green seven times and wither seven times and I shall find no message in this cleft. Wahnfred is dead and he will never come to life. You have killed him!"

"I can understand how you feel now, and I pardon you for your hasty words. But do not forget one thing: the blow which has fallen upon you might have fallen upon any one of us. And I am

sure had the lot fallen to me you would have concealed me in your house, would have accompanied me to a place of safety, would have brought me the necessities of life. You could not have done otherwise, or spoken otherwise, than I am doing now."

"Am I complaining?" said Wahnfred. "Say as often as you will that what I have done lies upon your consciences,—that may be, but I must suffer for it. My conscience would not be less sensitive had you helped me commit the murder ten times over. This is something to be settled with myself and with my God alone; and I will do it without aid from any of you."

"Wahnfred, you leave me with such bitter words?"

"The lot made an executioner of me; you have made me a slave and a villain!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked the fire guardian.

"Did I ask you to keep me prisoner in your cellar? Did I ask you to cast me out into the wilderness? But because of your fear that I would give myself into the hands of the law and betray you, you shut me up like a horse thief and are getting rid of me across the frontier at night, as though I had no right in Trawies. Are you then so sure, you wise men of Trawies, that I should prefer a miserable existence up there in the wilderness to a criminal's death? Then you know me better than I know myself. I doubt if I can keep away from the law very long."

“ And send us all to perdition ! ” cried the old man in great agitation.

“ Ha, now you tremble ! ” laughed Wahnfred, and how hollow his laughter sounded ! “ But why should I be angry with *you* ? What if they should demand the forty heads in Trawies ! One is enough to expiate the crime. ”

“ *O Gott*, Wahnfred, consider : they would not be satisfied to kill you with one stroke, they would torture you until they got your last drop of blood and your last dying words ! ”

“ Come, then, fire guardian, ” said the carpenter, endeavouring to drag the man to the entrance of the cave, “ come and throw me into the Trach ! Then you will be freed from all anxiety. ”

“ Are you mad, Wahnfred ? In the name of your wife, in the name of your boy, I implore you to flee and to save yourself ! ”

“ My wife ! My child ! ” groaned Wahnfred, striking his head with both hands.

The fire was dying out ; the cinders still crackled and snapped. Gallo stood struggling for words to comfort and reconcile his unhappy companion. He felt too deeply how Trawies was indebted to this man. Two crimes, heavy and terrible, would now rest upon the shoulders of the Trawies parish,—the dead man yonder, the ruined man here.

After a while Wahnfred became calm and collected. “ Well, well, I will live, ” he said ; “ death would not expiate such a crime, but life alone. Go home, fire guardian—and one thing : let me be forgotten ! Say to the others, they owe me nothing,

and let me be forgotten! Out of my sight, stranger, out of my sight! ”

With a repellent gesture, he sprang from the cave—and the fire guardian saw him no more.

Gallo searched in every direction, but heard no sound other than the rushing river. Above the ravine the rocks of the Trasank shimmered in the light of the moon.

With an anxious, heavy heart, such as he had never known before, the aged man returned over the inhospitable paths. Weary and broken, he approached his house, longing for rest; but it was to be denied him on this day.

While still some distance away, he heard noises in his yard and saw lights in his windows. Over in the village the people were abroad and there seemed to be an unusual commotion in the valley. The neighing of horses and the clash of arms resounded as never before in these woods, and lanterns were gleaming here and there among the trees.

The yard of the fire guardian was filled with soldiers; others were searching the house and out-buildings, demanding Gallo Weissbucher of the house mistress and of the servants. He was nowhere to be found; apparently he had flown, so he must be an accomplice.

Fortunately he arrived at this moment and asked what was wanted of him.

The reply was another question: Where had he been wandering about during the night?

He answered calmly that he was accountable to no one for his actions, but if he, as head of the

parish, had been out searching for the murderer in the houses of Trawies, they should be thankful to him, instead of meeting him so rudely. The forest parish of Trawies was still a place where grey-haired men were accustomed to be respected.

There was no time to discuss this now; he was ordered to go with the soldiers to the Gestade. The murderer had burned himself in his own house.

Such was the common report already; the bones of the carpenter, Wahnfred, burnt to a cinder, had been discovered in the ruins.

But there were too many officers present from Neubruck and Oberkloster and from more distant parts. The investigation proved that the little withered skeleton, with its toothless jaws, could not be that of the tall, youthful man.

“ This sacrifice has been in vain! ” whispered Bart-from-Tärn to the fire guardian.

Now the carpenter and his family were demanded.

“ Where shall we look for them? ” asked Firnerhans. “ If my hut burned down, I would not reflect long in these days as to what I should do in Trawies. I should cut myself a strong stick and depart. The carpenter has probably done the same. Look out on the public roads among the beggars; or you may have the good fortune to find him in some carpenter shop in Neubruck,—how should I know! ”

A stern-faced, bearded man sat upon his horse, listening. With his left hand he seized his sword,

his right he clenched, and with a gesture of defiance towards the men of Trawies, he snarled: " By God Almighty and the devil! Your heads shall answer for it if I do not have the murderer within twenty-four hours! "

CHAPTER XIV

“SINCE the memory of man so many ravens have not been seen in the valley of the Trach as during this winter.”

“How can it be otherwise, when the dead in Trawies are not buried?”

“What kind of a Christmas festival shall we have this year? Trawies is besieged as if it were a nest of robbers; a bailiff stands under every tree.”

“And to-morrow a peasant will hang on every tree!”

Such was the conversation of a little company of people walking along the highway; among them were a few of the oldest men who had been summoned to appear at the parsonage, under penalty of losing all their possessions.

“To even hear the word parsonage is enough to give one a feeling of horror,” grumbled Uli, the charcoal-burner.

“We should have managed it in quite a different way,” said Firnerhans; “but ’t is the way of the world: ‘Clever thoughts and a knocked-kneed horse always come limping in too late.’ We should have done with the parsonage as was done with the carpenter’s house over there. The priest would

have lost his life. An accident! Who could help it!"

A few soldiers, with unsheathed swords, approached the group, indicating to them that they must disperse.

"But I tell you," said the charcoal-burner, "we have been summoned to the meeting in the parsonage."

"Crowds are not allowed upon the public high-road. Disperse!"

Firnerhans received a shove from the butt-end of a musket and, with a savage curse, he sprang upon the bailiff; a struggle ensued between the peasants and soldiers, and when they separated, Firnerhans lay stretched upon the blood-bespattered snow. After a while he rose slowly, and dragging himself into the tavern, in an excited speech he urged the people there assembled to rise against the tyrants. The others were driven into the parsonage, where they were strictly guarded in the large room until the arrival of the authorities.

The officers of the law wore black robes over their uniforms. There were also priests among them who seemed to preside over the meeting. Most of them were pale and stern. One, however, was exceedingly stout, his features so buried in fat that it was difficult to tell whether he was endeavouring to look severe or to smile. But the ruddy glow of his broad countenance seemed to be not so much the glow of anger as one of gratitude for the liquid gifts of God. Among the pious, nothing is useless, not even the portly waist, which in this case served

as a cushion for a golden cross hanging by a chain from his neck; for this well-preserved gentleman was the prelate of Oberkloster. He sat behind the green table in a massive armchair. Beside him stood a slender, youthful priest with shaven face and short hair; his deep-set eyes were grey like a foggy day when it cannot be seen whether the sun is rising or setting. About the corners of his mouth were lines like those left by a forced smile. He was called Pater Dominicus. He did not sit down and his movements showed impatience.

Upon the table stood a crucifix and papers were lying about. When the men were assembled and the doors guarded, Pater Dominicus murmured the words: "In the name of the Holy Trinity!"

One of the lawyers now took the protocol and began to read. He read for over an hour, during which the men of Trawies often clenched their fists and raised their eyebrows.

When the paper was finished and the reader had cast an icy look over at the peasants, the white-bearded judge from Neubruck rose and said: "You have heard it!"

A dead silence.

"You have heard, men of Trawies, that you are guilty of the death of your priest. God's voice hath spoken. The people of Trawies have been examined, every answer has been strictly weighed, and that which the most foully murdered Herr Francisus has repeatedly told us—and which we were very loth to believe, for we had always been accustomed to obedience from our peasants—has been proved

true. Now it is as clear as day, you are rebels! You have disregarded the mandates of your master and refused him obedience in spiritual and worldly things. You have tried in numerous ways to bring about the removal of the priest, placed over you by the highest authorities, and, failing in this, have then conspired to dispose of him by other means. To-day no one can longer deny that the murderer is one of your own community; that you have given the criminal assistance in the deed, and that you have him somewhere in hiding. Since the search in the houses has been fruitless, we must infer that the man is moving about freely among you." The judge now raised his voice: "You oldest men of the parish! Not one of you shall return home until you have named the murderer and delivered him up!"

"Treason!" shouted a voice from among the accused. "Treason from the law itself! Caught and shut up here like stray dogs!"

The gleaming bayonets of the soldiers appeared in the doorway.

The judge stood motionless. When quiet once more reigned, he cried: "In the name of the justice of heaven and of earth! You men whose hair has become grey in the service of your parish, we implore you not faithlessly to plunge your own homes into destruction. The law raises the sword over all Trawies. Protect yourselves and your comrades—deliver up the murderer!"

From out the crowd of men the oldest now forced his way, — Gallo Weissbucher, chief and fire

guardian. Supporting himself upon a stick—for his knees trembled—he approached the officers and spoke:

“For that which has happened amongst us, for that, your Excellence, are you yourself to blame. To scorn and defy us you sent the answer to our petition by the priest himself. For generations back we have been free-born peasants, and rather than become slaves of tyranny we will go to destruction. He trod upon us and despised us; he forbade us our old rights in the forest and in the game; he was inconsiderate in demanding tithes when our harvests were poor; he insulted our ancient customs. Was it out of spite and hatred, or for his own pleasure? From many a poor soul has he withheld the sacrament and extreme unction in the dying hour. Only look about you! On these very walls his history stands written: deer-antlers, dog-whips, boar’s teeth, cudgels, and, by heaven, bags full of game besides! Where formerly hung the ciborium, now dangles the rifle; where formerly lay the Bible, playing-cards are now to be found. And this was the priest placed here as our model! Were we to be forced to live and die with such a one? Give us a just man, give us a *priest*—we are honest subjects and good Christians. Give us our liberty and we will be faithful—but that which has happened we do not regret!”

“Take note of the confession,” whispered Pater Dominicus to the recorder.

The judge then said: “For the last time I command you to deliver up the murderer!”

The fire guardian, pressing forward to the table, seized the crucifix and cried: "So truly as they nailed our Lord, an innocent man, upon the cross, we will not deliver him up!"

"You shall not desecrate the cross!" said the pale Pater, springing forward and snatching the crucifix from the man's hand. "By this sacred image have we sworn to make you suffer the penalty for the death of our brother."

"The priest would take even our cross away!" cried a sturdy woodsman. "Seize him! Seize him!"

Some of the men, in spite of the remonstrances of the fire guardian, fell upon the judges, threw the Pater to the floor, breaking the crucifix in twain in his hand before the soldiers could reach the spot.

"All is over with us!" cried the fire guardian, wringing his hands. The muskets and bayonets clattered and a shot was fired over the heads of the excited crowd.

"Down, down with these dogs of peasants!" was called from among the sorely beset judges. And now a horrible struggle began between the soldiers and peasants. The latter, at last realising that they had nothing more to lose, gave free rein to their passion and, more infuriated than ever, fell upon the judges, who were with difficulty protected by the soldiers.

At the same moment a wild tumult was heard outside and stones flew in through the windows.

"Lock the doors!" the chief judge was heard to say, as the people assembled without clamoured louder and louder for entrance. The fire guardian

implored his comrades in the room, implored the excited crowd outside to be quiet, but all in vain. Blood flowed upon the floor, the green table was overturned, the papers had been torn into bits and the pieces floated in the air. Pater Dominicus, at first in the greatest danger, had succeeded, with the aid of two soldiers, in freeing himself, and had climbed upon a chest which stood against the wall, beseeching the Archangel Michael to protect them from this hellish pack of hounds. Even the prelate had become more agile, having barricaded himself in a dark corner behind a praying-desk, his face, in his fright and anxiety, showing at last some signs of expression. The white-bearded judge of Neubruck remained the calmest of all. Seeing that the peasants were without weapons, he warned the soldiers not to make use of theirs except in extreme necessity. "These people here," he cried, "must not be massacred; they must be condemned!"

At this moment someone shouted: "Fire! The parsonage is burning!"

As the door flew open the smoke forced its way in, and the crackling of burning wood was heard.

"No one shall leave until the rebels are secured!" commanded the judge.

Then the struggle began anew, and amid the smoke and flames the oldest men of Trawies lost what little was left of their liberty. With arms bound behind their backs, they were led down the burning stairway, followed by the body of the murdered priest, borne upon the bier by soldiers—the last to leave the house.

The burning building was surrounded by a yelling mob of men and boys from the neighbourhood, and there were screaming women among them, clamouring for liberty and watching for their opportunity to plunder.

Suddenly a shot was fired; a young girl fell in the midst of the crowd, which was quite ready to disperse when it saw that soldiers with drawn weapons were charging upon it from the house, from the valley, and from the woods. But it was already surrounded, and being shut in and blinded by the thick curtain of smoke, every retreat seemed to be cut off. A cry of terror arose and all fled at last to the church to take refuge within its walls.

“Well and good,” said the judge, “these walls are secure. Lead in the prisoners also and lock the doors.”

As twilight approached a strange assembly was gathered in God’s house at Trawies. The people screamed, cursed, and threatened; they called upon the images of the saints to protect them against this tyranny. One man seized the rope and rang the bells; another sprang upon the bellows and struck the organ, sending forth shrill, discordant sounds. And through the windows shone the gleam from the burning parsonage.

The fire guardian stood by the communion table, staring at the large, dark spot upon the stone floor. *Such* was the fruit of the seed sown on that fatal day in the Rabenkirche. He did not dream that this was only the beginning of the events which were about to ruin and destroy Trawies.

CHAPTER XV

THE night of doom had come. Under the linden-tree in the graveyard the authorities from Neubruck and Oberkloster took counsel together as to what was now to be done. The proposal to have the skull of the murdered man filled three times with gold was not accepted. The people of Trawies should not be permitted to buy their peace with money. The judges agreed that these rebels, criminals, and traitors should suffer the severest penalty that it was possible for the Church and the law to inflict. And they then decided upon a plan. It was not original with them; it had been employed elsewhere for the punishment of crime. In those days the magistrates did not receive their authority from the people, but claimed that it was given them by God Himself, and they often used their power in a heartless and inhuman manner.

As night fell, soldiers entered the church, unbound and disarmed the prisoners, arranging them on either side of the chancel, as if a processional were about to take place. Two candles were lighted on the altar. The door of the sacristy was then opened; the body of the priest, borne by four men, was brought in and laid upon the steps, where a few

days before he had fallen from the blow of the axe. Pater Dominicus, in his long, black robe, now came forward carrying a chalice, which he placed at the head of the dead man. Last of all, the other judges and priests arrived and grouped themselves about the altar.

During these proceedings there was a deep silence among the prisoners.

“What is going to happen?” they then whispered to one another.

“It is the Judgment of God,”¹ said one.

“The Judgment of God! If they are seeking the murderer, each one of us will be ordered to lay his hand upon the body of the dead priest; at the touch of the murderer the wound will bleed.”

“A most interesting spectacle! And if the murderer is not here?”

“Then the wound will not bleed.”

“And if it does not bleed?”

“Then the murderer is not here. That is the Judgment of God.”

“It will not be dangerous for us.”

The murmuring ceased, for the judge raised his voice and spoke:

“I am an aged man—a sinner myself—and I have grown grey at my task of executing the law, but never was a verdict harder for me to give than the one I must pronounce to-day. I close my ears to my words, for I say them in the name of justice.

¹Judgment of God: “A decision by some perilous experiment—a term applied to extraordinary trials of secret crimes, it being imagined that God would work miracles to vindicate innocence.”

As the matter now stands, the law cares no longer to punish the tool of the crime—this we could easily discover by means of torture—but the criminal. And in this case the criminal is the people of Trawies. Men of Trawies, to-day for the last time you are to march in solemn procession about the altar of your old parish church! Each one of you, as you pass the dead priest, shall take from the chalice that stands at his head a grain of corn wrapped in a bit of paper. The grains are white and grew in God's earth; but there are twelve among them which are black. Whoever draws one of the twelve shall, in three days from now, die by the sword and appear before the Eternal Judge."

A heart-rending cry arose from the crowd and the people huddled together,—“like sheep in a barn when the thief is after its victim,” says the old chronicle. “They rushed about wildly, imploring the saints of heaven to save them; they shook the doors as though they would tear them down; they struck their heads against the walls; they called on the devil with such frightful oaths that even the priests trembled.”

When the tumult had sufficiently subsided for the judge to speak, he continued: “That you may see how God, in His mercy, has mitigated this sentence, the kernels in the chalice far outnumber your heads, and should you, in spite of appearances, be innocent of the crime, it is quite possible that you may all escape.”

The fire guardian now advanced, his figure drawn

to its full height, his grey head erect, his hands stretched out towards the priests.

“ Stop! ” he cried in a hollow voice. “ Stop, you men of justice! Such desecration in this holy place! That is the chalice for the blood of our Lord. Throw away the lots! Throw away the lots! ”

He attempted to seize the chalice, but a soldier pushed him back.

“ And if you, ” he continued, “ intend to atone for the murder committed here with murder, then take this old man, the head of the parish, and expiate with his blood that which must be expiated! ” Wringing his hands, he fell prostrate before the judges and cried: “ Take *my* life, I implore you, but let the people go! ”

“ Rise, old man, ” said the judge coldly, “ and do not interfere with the Judgment of God. You shall be spared from putting your hand into the chalice. Let the procession begin! Those to whom God shows mercy may pass out through the sacristy and go home free. ”

A sign was given to the soldiers and the people were set in motion.

The narrator has sought in vain for colours with which to paint the despair that settled upon the faces of the men during this gloomy procession, but the chronicle briefly states: “ Seeing that it was inevitable, they advanced bravely, each one muttering: ‘ If the lot falls to me, the sooner my account with death is settled, the better. ’ ”

With heavy steps and solemn faces they walked

around the altar, approached the dead man, and drew their lots. Some cast a glance of hatred at the murdered priest; others turned shuddering away, more terrified at the sight than at the death-laden chalice, containing perhaps their own doom; some reached with trembling hand into the cup; some with a bold grasp, gnashing their teeth angrily, as if they would grapple with fate. Then each man was led before the judge, the little package taken from his hand and opened. If the kernel was white, even the judges seemed to draw a long breath of relief, and the fortunate man was allowed to pass out through the narrow doorway. And how he shouted for joy in the quiet starlit night! How he leapt about with the nimbleness of youth,—even though he were a bent old man,—how he swore to keep away from the church at Trawies and thenceforth to say his prayers in the green woods under God's bright sky!

The few women who were imprisoned with the others escaped in safety; but they wrung their hands in dismay at this strange spectacle and at the parsonage, now in ashes, and, muttering a prayer, they hastened away.

The roadster from the lower Trach was the first to draw a black kernel from the chalice. When he saw it, he started back in horror, but then stood firmly, pale and motionless. He was followed by a number of the more fortunate, who, sighing for joy, went out into the starry night. There was one among them who strode as gloomily and solemnly to his freedom as if he were going to his death.

“ Why do you not say, ‘ praise God ! ’ ” asked a neighbour outside.

“ For what ? ” the man replied. “ Oh, friend, as things will now be, death were better for us than life ! ”

The second man to be condemned was a wood-cutter from the Tärn. He burst into a shrill laugh.

The third followed soon, an old workman from Sandhok’s farm, who had a passion for bowling and cards.

“ I knew it, ” he cried angrily ; “ if something is at stake, I always lose ! ”

The next were two peasants from the Johannesberg. They showed no sign. A number then passed out and the blood-stained Firnerhans drew a black kernel.

After him came Rocken-Paul’s man, Simon, who had already been saved so miraculously and who had had the ill-fortune to venture near the church to-day. He hesitated a long time before putting his hand into the chalice, then plunged it to the very bottom. Without approaching the judges, he quickly opened the paper himself, as if he were taking a nut from its shell, and held it aloft. It was black.

“ Yes, my beloved Han ! ” he sighed, as he joined the condemned in the alcove guarded by soldiers.

A long procession passed out into the night, into the open forest. How sadly Simon gazed after them !

A few men from the upper Trach now drew the fatal kernels, among them a pedlar who had come

to Trawies to sell tinder and rat poison. He fell upon his knees before the judges, pleading that he was innocent and did not belong to the heathenish Trawiesers; that he told his beads every day, often fasting for weeks—he had voluntarily chosen poverty; that he furnished the tinder to the pious brothers at Oberkloster for their consecrated fire in the church and in the kitchen; that he always brought them the pitch for their wine-casks in the cellar; and that he was thinking of taking orders himself. It was all in vain. The judges appealed to the Judgment of God, saying: “The Eternal One knows why He requires your life!” The poor creature rolled on the floor, where he writhed in agony until he became senseless.

Next came a man at whose appearance some could hardly refrain from laughing; others said: “*Mein Gott!* That one too!”

It was the dwarf from Firnerhans’ farm, the “Three-Headed Osel.” At first he gazed a while at the dead man, then limping up to the chalice, began to play with the kernels. Finally selecting one, he handed it to the judges. It was black. Osel smiled, demanded it back as his property, put it into his pocket, and, with apparent self-complacency, took his place among the condemned.

The judges looked at each other questioningly. Are not the weak-minded exempt? Is such a creature capable of sin? By no means. As the last of the uncondemned were passing through the doorway the Three-Headed Osel started to follow them and no one prevented him.

The church was now empty. Only a few kernels remained in the chalice, no more black ones among them. The judges departed. The eleven men who had drawn the fatal lots were taken into the sacristan's little house, where they were strictly guarded. From the ruins of the parsonage the smoke rose slowly and sadly, covering the starry sky with a thick veil.

The poor unfortunate men lay about on the straw; one deeply buried under it, another cowering in a corner; a third was lying upon his face, the next upon his back, supporting his head on his arms. Thus they had lain for many hours. No one asked them how they had slept that night in their new quarters. They were allowed to remain in their rough beds until late in the morning.

“What are we waiting for?” asked one.

“To be beheaded,” answered his neighbour.

At the doors and windows stood the soldiers, their bayonets glittering in the sun.

There were a few among the prisoners who had wailed and lamented the entire night, and now, exhausted, were lying half asleep.

“My father always told me,” remarked the wood-cutter from the Tärn, the one who had laughed when he drew his lot, “my father always said that smoking tobacco was bad for the health, and he was right, for the devil's weed has killed me.”

“But you are alive now, Pistel.”

“I am as near drawing my last breath as you are. For a whole year I have not been to church in

Trawies, not since the tavern was started in the Tärrn. But just as this miserable snowstorm came on and the women folks refused to go in the bad weather to mass, my tobacco gave out, and so it happened that I had to come to Trawies myself. And when my pockets were full and my purse empty, I joined the crowd at the parsonage which was burning. With a turn of the hand the devil had me and here I am. So I say: Don't get into the habit of smoking!"

"If I had only been clever enough," said Sandhok's old man, "to have taken out several kernels at once—there would surely have been a white one among them—and to have thrown the black ones away! If I had only been clever enough!"

"Ha, ha! you've cheated at cards all your life and now in this last game, when your head's at stake, you show an honesty which is scandalising."

"Oh, oh, oh!" sighed the man.

"Surely, now," cried another, rising from the straw, "they just want to frighten us a bit and then they will let us go. I could never believe that the law would put us to death like a band of murderers, and each one of us is as innocent, so far as the priest is concerned, as the Lamb of God in heaven!"

"Friend," said Firnerhans, "don't flatter yourself. You must still remember how, a few years ago, the letter carrier from Siebenbaum was robbed and murdered on the highway. Every traveller found upon this road was arrested, and because

none of them would confess to the murder, three, chosen by lot, lost their heads."

"Have you heard that story too?" asked in a wailing tone the pedlar of tinder.

"One only needs to know the law," continued Firnerhans; "but we have one thing to comfort us: In an age which still recognises the *Vehmich*¹ Law and the Judgment of God, that now and then takes pleasure in burning a witch, as we burn the stubble on our fields,—in such a happy age, we are not the only ones who die innocent. We did not realise the blessing of living between the Tärn and the Trasank in the good old days. To think of our being shut in here like fatted sheep before slaughter! But groaning and grumbling will not help us. The best we can do is to turn our backs upon the world and die like men!"

A few murmured resentfully, the most remained silent.

"Not that I care so much about my head!" mused Simon, "but I'm sorry on account of my Han." He discovered some crude writing materials in the sacristan's house, with which he wrote the following letter:

"MY DARLING HAN:

"It's curious, is n't it, how they have got me after all? It was all on account of a cow, which I was keeping in the tavern barn. Word was sent

¹ *Vehmich* Law. The law of a secret society in Germany during the Middle Ages, which for a time held powerful sway over the people by its horrible executions.

me that her calf had arrived and that I was to come and see it. As I was not busy, and it being Advent, I came. It 's a nice little steer, light yellow, and will be good for a yoke. All of a sudden the parsonage caught fire and I ran down to help put it out. And then they drove us into the church and picked out twelve of us to be beheaded. To-day my head is still on my shoulders, and what I want to write to thee, dearest sweetheart, is that thou art my last thought. The cow and the calf are for thee to keep. Weep for me as much as thou wilt, but it will do no good. No one knows better than thou that I am innocent, but how does that help matters as long as I 'm caught? If beheaded people recover their heads in heaven, perhaps we shall meet and marry yet.

“ Thy loving

“ SIMON HANESER.

“ P. S.—When it will happen, I don't know; but stay at home and don't worry about it. The tavern-keeper's wife wants the milch-cow until the Feast of St. Peter. Let her have it.”

The narrator relates the story thus, but the present generation will hardly believe that at that time a healthy young peasant lad could take leave of life in this cheerful manner. The present generation decries the world with every breath, at the same time clinging to it anxiously with all its might, or, in despair, throwing itself under its crushing wheels. It did not occur to Simon to do either the one or the other. “ If it may be, live merrily; if it must

be, die merrily!" was his motto. He knew little about philosophy.

Simon had hardly finished his letter when a priest, accompanied by soldiers, entered, bringing with him Extreme Unction. As the men caught sight of the chalice, Firnerhans exclaimed: "Away! away! We know your chalice!"

The priest spoke mild, friendly words to them, spoke of the pardon for the penitent, of the rejoicing in heaven over a repentant sinner.

"If I regret anything, it is that I did n't choke you yesterday!" cried one of the men, attempting to spring upon the priest and carry out his design to-day. The soldiers thrust him back and he fell groaning against the wall.

Then the tinder pedlar crawled up to the priest, imploring him to intercede for him with the judges.

"Tell them that their Judgment of God is worthless and condemns the innocent, the same to-day as at the time of the murder of the letter carrier from Siebenbaum. Among those beheaded then were all kinds of people, but not the murderer. If the high court would know who killed the letter carrier, it should ask me."

"I should like to see them do it," laughed Firnerhans.

"You are pitiable creatures," said the priest: "you blaspheme against Heaven, Who has chosen you to expiate this crime. If God's own Son did not refuse to die innocent to redeem the world, why should you sinners murmur?"

"You, holy man," said Firnerhans, "are the

substitute of God's Son; come and change places with me; the death of a priest does far greater service to the world than that of a peasant."

The wood-cutter from the Tärn now spoke: "This is foolish talk. Let each one die for himself, and then hold his tongue."

In the church tower the bells were tolling.

"Do you hear?" said the priest. "Banish your angry thoughts, fall upon your knees and pray. The bells announce the hour."

The men turned deathly pale.

"You, martyrs, shall take leave of this world to the accompaniment of their Christian tones. Then the bells shall ring no more in Trawies. The Holy Church has pronounced an interdict upon this parish, and from the hour of your last breath, Trawies is placed under the ban!"

CHAPTER XVI

IT is impossible to describe the terror which reigned in the forests. With comparative calmness we may witness the condemned prisoners in their last hour; but our pen quails at writing of the despair of their wives, sisters, brothers, and children. The lamentations were heard from house to house. Suddenly they ceased, like a tempest that has spent its force, and the women asked each other over and over whether it were true, whether it could be true. And when it was confirmed again and again, the wail of anguish burst forth anew.

They hastened to the village with petitions and prayers, begging to be allowed to see their dear ones once more. Armed with knives and household utensils, they made a bold attempt to burst open the prison and liberate the men, but they were greeted with musket-balls. Unhappy folk, you do not understand what military rule signifies! They were thrown to the ground and trampled under foot, until at last they were made to comprehend the brutal force which was so mercilessly rampant in Trawies. When, finally, they were overcome with weariness, when their throats had become hoarse and their eyes dry, they fell back benumbed in an inertia of despair.

Bart-from-Tärn was in a most unhappy frame of mind. He had not been present at the meeting in the parsonage, although he had meant to be. He had said to his wife that very day, as she sat chatting with Mistress Wahnfred in her little room, trying to distract the poor woman who had lost husband and home: "Wife," said he, "I am going down to Trawies."

"Again," she replied, "right in the middle of a working day!"

"They are to meet and take counsel; there is much to be done in the parish."

He put on his broad hat, took his beech-wood stick in his hand, saying: "Keep the doors locked, for it is unsafe now." And he departed.

Behind the house in the sheep-yard upon a stump projecting out of the snow sat little Erlefried, Wahnfred's son. His feet dangled over the stump, his arms were folded, and he was gazing dreamily into the distance. He was no longer merry, as was his wont; he had no occupation now, and he often asked why he was not allowed to go to school. The good farm people had their own work to attend to and did not understand children. His mother sat knitting in her room, weeping silently. So he wandered about alone, thinking of his father. He realised that something unusual must have happened to him, but whenever he attempted to ask concerning him,—this father with whom he had worked so happily in the shop, who had played with him, who had talked with him about so many things, who had been so affectionate with him,—

whenever he attempted to ask the question, his lips were sealed. He suddenly ceased to be a child. He seemed to tremble before the answer.

When Bart saw the lad sitting alone and sorrowful on this dark winter day, he was filled with a deep pity for the child.

“ They have taken thy father from thee and now leave thee to thyself. Thou little dreamest what a sacrifice thou, innocent child, hast been obliged to make for thy home ! ”

Then approaching him, Bart called : “ Little boy, what art thou doing there ? ”

Erlefried sprang down from the stump, hastening to meet his new protector.

“ Look, Erlefried, we will set up another saint on this stump now. Dost thou know how to make snow-men ? ”

He nodded assent, but said that he did not care for it.

“ Nonsense ! ” said Bart, trying to cheer him. “ Such a boy as thou, and not care for it ! We ’ll see about that. Look, how well the snow packs to-day ! I wonder if I can do it still. I was once a boy like thyself, though much rougher. I used to wrestle with the other lads until my clothes were in tatters ; and when there were no boys at hand, I would make them for myself out of snow ; regular giants, and horses with riders, like the Turks. And when I had finished the whole row, I would fall upon the enemy and knock off their heads. See, here ’s one already ! ”

While chatting thus, Bart had made a very

respectable snow-man upon the stump. That started Erlefried and he soon had another beside it. Then they made a horse with a rider and other figures, one large one, very fine to look upon. Bart laid special stress upon long noses, but this seemed to have little effect upon Erlefried, who paid more attention to the broad chests of the men and to the erect, well poised heads of the horses. He grew more and more eager at his task; his cheeks glowed and his eyes sparkled.

It was the same with Bart. At first playing with the cold snow simply out of friendliness, the boyish passion had now taken possession of him. The cheerful white figures seemed to banish all the serious, gloomy events of his life; his childhood, bright and joyous, had returned; the snow-sword of the knight and the comical cap of the bishop reawakened all his youthful enthusiasm; the snow was no longer cold, and Bart, whose countenance was usually so serious, had glowing cheeks and beaming eyes.

Suddenly his wife called from the yard, asking whether that were the council in Trawies.

Sure enough, the council! Bart had stupidly forgotten all about it. Now it was too late; either the people had already assembled and would be just breaking up when he arrived, or they had not met at all, in which case his going would not bring them together. So the most sensible thing would be to stay at home with Erlefried and knock off the heads of the snow-men.

A little at one side away from the other figures,

almost on the edge of the forest, the boy was working on a new image. It was larger than the rest and he packed the snow as firmly as possible, making it as high as his hands could reach. He was silent, but industrious, and when Bart started playfully to knock down the other figures, the boy placed himself protectingly before his new work of art, saying in a pleading tone: "Not that one!"

The little face was so serious and the request so earnest that Bart asked: "Why not that particular one?" and the boy replied: "That is my father."

Thus Fate, ever mysterious, plays with us; sometimes approaching us warningly, but in a friendly way; while in another place, at another time, it crushes us, relentlessly, without plan, without mercy. We know what was happening that day in Trawies, while Bart-from-Tärn and the boy Erlefried—Wahnfred's son—were making and destroying snow-men on those wintry heights.

On the Johannesberg, in Firnerhans' house, the events were of quite a different nature. Firnerhans' wife, when she learned of the unheard-of imprisonment in the church, broke out at first into expressions of anger against her husband. Why did he go off and neglect house and farm? Why did he mix himself up in things in which he had no concern? Her first husband—she had had two—never troubled himself in the least about affairs outside, but had stayed at home with his wife and become a well-to-do man. The money that the first

had amassed the second had spent. To be sure, the people never seemed to care for the first one, but the second they had tried to push ahead everywhere, wherever they could make a cat's paw of him. The third would probably not be his equal in good-nature. It was all terrible! And then she began to weep as bitterly as if there had never been a first and as if there were no hope of a third.

At midnight Osel returned home. He had lingered on the way showing his black kernel to everyone he met. Few had any idea what a fatal thing it was, attributing the pleasure which he seemed to take in it to his half-witted brain. But when he met Roderich, the tramp, who already knew the facts, and who to-day wore a sarcastic expression on his usually serious face, the latter said:

"No, my dear Osel, you cannot go home with this little ball; you belong to the twelve and must be beheaded."

Osel nodded joyfully with his three heads. Then he asked when the execution was to take place.

"To-morrow, but you must get up early or you will be too late. They will not wait for you."

Osel seemed to consider a moment, then proceeded on his way. It was midnight before he went to bed, but he left his door open that the first sound in the house might waken him. Then he slept such a sleep as a criminal seldom enjoys.

In the morning he was awake with the cocks. He rose hastily and the people wondered to see him standing so early at the trough, washing himself industriously.

“ He ’s going to church to pray for Firnerhans; he ’s a good fellow,” they thought.

Osel was a youth of twenty, but looked younger, and to-day his face beamed as though he were going to a wedding. He dressed himself in his holiday attire, with the red waistcoat and yellow kerchief; his blonde hair, usually a dry, tumbled mass, was to-day combed smoothly down over his light eyebrows and lashes, from under which his eyes now sparkled with unusual expression. He had picked a pink in the garden and fastened it on his hat, as is customary on Corpus Christi Day. Then, entering the house, he devoured his morning porridge. When he had finished he stood a while at the door as though thinking. He seemed to be trying to decide how he should best take leave of his friends, but being unable to do this, he slipped quietly away.

He descended the mountain towards the Johannes brook. Above the Kofel forest gleamed the spire of the church. Before reaching the Trach he discovered a squirrel in the branches of a pine-tree. He stopped, and with a blank expression on his face, turned into a side path in pursuit of the little creature and was soon lost in the forest.

In the valley shots were heard that morning; towards noon all was still again. The sun had gradually disappeared and the sky was covered with soft grey clouds. In the afternoon these grew denser and the deep shadows of the wooded hills were sharply outlined, until at last, slowly, and one by one, a few flakes whirled in the air.

Since early that morning soldiers had been going from house to house, searching the chests for spun yarn, taking the spools from the spinning-wheels and removing the distaffs. They then announced that the people of Trawies were ordered to assemble at the Dreiwand in the afternoon. The Dreiwand rose perpendicularly out of the water, a short distance below the church, where the Rocken brook flowed into the Trach, forming here a deep, dark, slimy pool. About it flourished a thick growth of pines, casting at all times a gloom over this spot. Only in midsummer a few rays of sunshine penetrated into the gorge at noon, covering it with a soft, misty veil of blue.

Below the Dreiwand, whose high breastwork was formed by three rocky projections, resembling balconies, the road from the Trasank valley and the Rockenberg crossed a bridge, then turned into a narrow path on this side of the water opposite the cliff, thus connecting the outlying regions with Trawies. It is the same now as on that fatal day, when on this spot the doom of Trawies was sealed.

Soon after noon the people began to assemble, stationing themselves along the road and under the cliff opposite the precipice. There were some present who, regardless of warnings of danger, out of curiosity could not refrain from coming to learn how this affair was to end. Some had come with the intention of inciting the crowd to action; others, with the hope of appeasing it. It might be merely a question of arriving at some agreement with the authorities and Trawies would thus be saved from a

further blow. Soldiers were watching every movement of the crowd.

The people, not daring to utter a word aloud, whispered all the more defiantly. Those standing under the cliff could see the church and the ruins of the parsonage.

From this direction, to the mournful tolling of bells, a procession of black-robed figures, bearing three torches, now approached. They passed behind the crag and appeared on the first projecting rock, high above the water. They were the priests and judges. The torches, carried by three aged men, cast a dim, red light into the gorge, and from the darkening sky fell the trembling snow-flakes.

A deep silence reigned. From among the men upon the crag, Pater Dominicus now advanced, holding in his hand a long, black wand surmounted by a cross. Turning towards the people, and with a loud voice, he said:

“ Hear ye, the Lord speaks through His prophets: Ye are stubborn and unrepentant; ye are the tree that dies, the flesh that decays. Cursed be your seed. Your land shall become desolate; fire shall destroy your harvests; upon your fields, which ye have watered with your sweat, shall grow weeds and poisonous plants; I will send a pestilence among you and ye shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy. Brother shall slay brother and I will smite you with madness. Ye shall call upon My name in vain; ye shall pray to Me, but I will cast you forth from My footstool. for ye have despised the name of the Lord and have killed His servant! ”

“ Oh, it is only a sermon ! ” murmured one of the audience.

The priest now took a roll of manuscript in his hand, saying : “ In the name of the Holy Trinity ! ” Then with a loud, solemn voice, he repeated the following words :

“ Parish of Trawies ! From this hour on shall you be outcasts ! You have broken the laws of the Church and of the Emperor ; you are stubborn and unrepentant ; you have murdered your priest, therefore shall you have no priest ! You have desecrated the altar of your God, so shall weeds grow upon it and ravens shall inhabit your temple. The tongues shall be torn from the bells upon the tower ; your children shall be baptised with the rain from heaven, and the sacrament of marriage withheld from the bridal pair, the holy communion from the dying, the consecrated earth from the dead. Even as the rebellious spirits were cast out of heaven by the archangel Michael, so shall you, parish of Trawies, be cast out from the holy peace of God’s kingdom. You are devoid of honour and shall be deprived of all Christian intercourse ; you wished for freedom, you shall be as free as the birds in the air, as the wolf in the forest. Whosoever harbours one of your community in his house shall himself forfeit the protection of the law ; whosoever kills one of your community shall be exempt from the law. Your boundaries shall be cut off and surrounded by a belt of fire. You shall be delivered into the hands of the Prince of Darkness, who shall have you in his power so long as you remain unrepentant ! ”

He ceased speaking. The bells were also silent. During the anathema, the audience, at first in a mocking mood, had, one by one, grown deathly pale. But there were some among them who gnashed their teeth and clenched their fists. Like a living statue the dark figure of the priest towered yonder on the crag, illuminated by the three torches, which cast their shadows far over the cliff. Raising aloft the black wand with the cross, he cried:

“Annulled shall be your rights to the cross of our Redeemer!” and breaking it in twain he hurled the pieces into the river. Then, with a firm grasp, he seized one of the torches: “Annulled shall be your rights to the protection of God the Father!” and he flung the flickering taper into the water. “Annulled shall be your rights to the love of the Son of God!” and he threw the second torch from him. At last, seizing the third torch, he shrieked: “Annulled shall be your rights to the grace of God and to the Holy Ghost!” and he cast the burning taper into the abyss, where all three were extinguished with a hissing sound.

A wild excitement now took possession of the assembled crowd and many of the women threw themselves upon the ground wailing and crying: “Now it is over with us, our heaven is gone! Never shall we see our dear ones again! We are damned to the lowest depths of hell! It is all over for ever!”

Such pitiful weeping and lamentation as now arose in this mountain gorge were never heard before. Parents cursed their children and children

their parents, and they raved as the Scripture tells us lost souls shall rave at the last judgment.

When twilight was gathering and the outlawed folk were hastening in confusion up and down the Trach, many with the feeling that their poor souls had been torn from their bodies, many nearly insane, and again others who sneered and jested, a second procession started from the church. By the light of lanterns and torches, the priests were solemnly carrying away the monstrance with the Host. On both sides of the road the trees bent with the heavy weight of snow; jays and yellow-hammers fluttered over the heads of the priests, as though wishing to act as escorts to the sacred body of our Lord.

“And now my Jesus is going!” cried a woman in the crowd, springing forward and falling prostrate before the procession. “Thou shalt not leave me! My child at home is dying!”

Silently and solemnly they passed the weeping woman. Suddenly grown speechless, she stared after the retreating forms with her fixed eyes, in which the light of the swaying torches was reflected.

Not far from the place where the Johannes brook flowed into the river, the procession was met by Uli, the charcoal-burner, and Roderich, the tramp. They had already seen from a distance a piece of one of the torches floating in the Trach, without understanding its meaning. As they now saw the approaching line of figures, they questioned each other.

“What are those lights coming towards us?”

“They are probably carrying the dead priest to

Oberkloster," said the tramp, "and they are quite right; here in our churchyard he would give us no peace."

"His ghost will wander about for a long time yet in Trawies, you mark my words."

"Look, that 's like a Corpus Christi procession! They are carrying the sacred Host away with them."

"Can it be true, what I heard to-day?"

"They are taking the sacrament from us and have closed the church."

"It 's all the same to me, if I 'm only on this side of the door."

"And have outlawed us all."

"'T is the same to me," said Roderich, the tramp, again. "You, Uli, have got something; you 've a house and wife and three children and a goat—I can see how such a thing would affect you. But we free folk, who have so arranged our affairs that no one can take anything away from us, because we 've nothing to lose, we can laugh now."

"But think, my dear Roderich, we belong to the devil!"

"Later," hissed the tramp into the charcoal-burner's ear, "later, there 'll be money for us! The devil, I tell you, demands nothing without pay. Brother, I 'm a happy man again!"

In the meantime the procession had passed. In solemn dignity it moved along the banks of the roaring Trach towards the Gestade. After the priests and judges had walked for more than three hours with the sacrament, they passed through the

last gorge, where the Trach foams in a deep, dark basin and a difficult path ascends along the cliffs towards the summit, upon which, at that time, stood a group of five pine-trees. At this point the heathland begins. Under these trees they stopped to rest their sacred burden upon a stone, falling on their knees in adoration before it.

Behind them followed a troop of soldiers, who, when they reached the narrow path along the inhospitable cliff, boldly crossed the little bridge, which they then destroyed together with its stone foundation, sending it crashing into the abyss below. When the last link with Trawies had been broken, with boughs from the pine-trees they lighted fires on the boundary line, stretching a cord from stone to stone and from tree to tree. The pines seemed to groan as they felt it tightening about them,—this cord, made from the hemp grown in the valley of the Trach, and spun from the distaffs in the houses of Trawies.

The confusion in the little village continued. The tavern alone remained undisturbed by all this misery. To be sure, the women, even there, were sobbing in the kitchen, but in another room the men were drinking. Before the door, his hands thrust into his pockets, stood the "Three-Headed Osel," staring first at the house, then wonderingly up towards the church and out into the darkness. When, then, was the execution to take place? He had been ready half the day, and nowhere could he find signs that such a thing was to happen. The

poor lad kept showing his black kernel to prove that it gave him certain rights, but no one paid heed to him and he was left to himself.

From the church windows gleamed a light, too bright to come from the altar lamp. In the churchyard a new grave had been dug, in which had been laid a body with a fractured skull. The cross formerly towering in the midst of the burial-ground lay in ruins upon the snow. And over all reigned a deep silence.

The sacristan now approached the church. On the evening of the revolt, at sight of the parsonage in flames, he had fled in the direction of the Tra-sank. He had wandered about aimlessly for days, but now believing that order would surely be restored once more, he returned over the pathless wilderness, descending by way of the Wildwiese.

The first duty of an honest sacristan is his church. From the light in the windows he supposed that a service must be taking place there. Opening the door, he observed that the benches were empty. The stillness was awful, and at the altar candles were burning. He entered, but soon rushed out again, his arms outstretched, his face ghastly pale, his features contorted with horror, his burning lips unable to utter a sound. Thus he hastened down to the village and burst into the tavern, sighing, groaning, and wringing his hands, and pointing towards the church.

The people crowded about him. "He has just discovered that our altar has been plundered," said one.

But the sacristan stretched out both arms and, stammering unintelligible words, stared at the floor with his rolling eyes, and again pointing towards the church, with a cry of terror he buried his face in his hands.

The people then left the house and ascended the hill to the church. On the altar, about the empty tabernacle, the candles were still burning, and on the bloody steps—lay the headless bodies of the condemned.

At the same hour, innumerable points of light, on the summit of the Trasank and on the boundary hills at the heathland, shed their rays over the forests of the Firn, the Tärn, and the Ritscher, down into Trawies. They were the signal fires, shutting in and marking the crushed and outcast forest parish, a flaming barrier, separating it from God and man; a link of the fiery chain "which enfetters the dragon."

Thus were the symbols of the interdict fulfilled!

BOOK II
GODLESS

CHAPTER I

DURING this eventful time, little Erlefried, in his childlike simplicity, climbed the hill one morning to the church in Trawies. He was carrying a greeting to the Christ Child, in anticipation of the coming Christmas festival. He was dressed in holiday attire, which harmonised with his whole frame of mind; his fresh young body exulted in the physical exercise and he felt that it was good to be alive; his soul, filled with the joys of his religious faith, soared, as only the soul of a forest child can soar, even unto the Eternal Throne.

He had been kept in ignorance of all that which had taken place—he was still untouched by the curse. He knew well that something unusual had happened concerning his father; and his tender young heart was anxious; but having been taught the efficacy of prayer, he longed to pray. As he approached the village, the bells did not greet him as usual, and on reaching the church, he was alarmed and terrified. Before the door stood a soldier with un-sheathed sword and two men were walling up the entrance.

“ Oh, child,” murmured one of the workmen, “ thou wouldst say thy prayers and we no longer

have a God. He has deserted us all and His temple has become a sepulchre for murderers.”

The speaker was reminded by the soldier that he was there to work, not to chatter.

Erlefried crept silently away, but meeting Sandhok soon afterwards, he received from him a partial explanation.

“ Art thou looking for something, my lad ? ”

“ I am looking for my God,” sobbed the boy.

“ Oh, thou little simpleton! Didst thou not know, then, that a few days ago they drowned the Trinity in the Trach? Let us be glad of it, for now we are free! ”

Sadly Erlefried started on his homeward path, the very ground seeming to tremble under him, for how could anything stand firm if all support were taken away? Oh, if he could only get safely home to his mother and the good Bart.

On the way he met the peasant Isidor, who was more explicit. Yes, it was true, the people of Trawies were without a God.

On the Freiwildhöhe, under two old beech-trees, stretching their bare branches out into the blue, winter sky, stood an image of the Virgin. The boy climbing the path longed in his anguish of heart to pray before it,—for if our God is taken from us, must we not depend upon our Beloved Lady? All was quiet, not a sound in the valley, not a bird-note in the trees, and as Erlefried knelt upon the bare stone, he could hear the beating of the Virgin’s heart. Trembling for joy he rose, and, kissing the wooden image, now alive, he hastened

away. Happily for the child, there was no one present to tell him that a wood-beetle was boring into the wood.

As he wandered over the forest path he was unable to think of anything but that Trawies had lost its God, and that there could be no more heaven. Catching sight of a deer through the branches, it suddenly occurred to him: "What will happen to poachers now? It will be all the better for them, for they will not be discovered." A squirrel was running up a tree, and from the topmost boughs it looked down, almost scornfully, at the boy, as though it would say: "Poor wretch, at present thou art no more fortunate than I! You sons of God, who have always reproached us for having no Saviour and for leading such a pitiable life (and even that you have tried to take from us), now we are as well off as you—but I can climb faster."

The boy then listened to the splashing of the forest brook; how often had he heard it before, but to-day everything frightened him and made him nervous. To be sure, the sun was still shining, although no longer with the same brilliancy; the shadows were lying ghost-like across the path. He heard the thundering of a distant avalanche and the crashing of falling trees. There was no longer an Almighty Hand to protect him from danger.

As he was crossing the high bridge over the gorge he stopped in the middle and gazed down into the abyss. His eyes were riveted to the gloomy depths,—for must he not now forego his heavenward glance? The bridge seemed to be turning, but one

or two timely leaps saved him before he was overcome with dizziness. When he finally reached Bart's old mountain home he was quite exhausted.

He noticed how pale his mother's cheeks were and how patiently she was bearing her earthly sorrows, for was she not hoping to go at last to the dear God? And everything depended upon the dear God. She did not know what Erlefried knew.

"Why dost thou not eat thy soup, my boy?" asked the mother, noticing that he left it untasted. As he made no reply, she added: "And why art thou so quiet to-day?" Then he began to sob.

"Child, what has happened to thee?"

"Mother," answered the lad, burying his curly head in her bosom, "I know something terrible."

"About thy father?" asked the woman.

"Something quite different—I cannot say how terrible!"

"Compose thyself, Erlefried, then tell me what has happened."

"There is no—" sobbed the boy—"there is no God!" Overcome with horror, he hid his face in his mother's dress.

Drawing herself erect, she said calmly: "Who could have been so stupid as to tell thee that? Who can deny a thing that has been a certainty from everlasting to everlasting and cannot be otherwise?"

"There is a God? There is?" asked the boy joyfully.

"Thou knowest it, for art thou not alive? Heaven and earth are His body."

And then the mother began, partly to distract her own anxious thoughts, partly to cheer the unhappy boy, to tell him of God and heaven, which she did in a manner original with herself.

“ Heaven is like the church, my child, only a thousand times more beautiful. Thou couldst never count the lighted candles, or the angels flying about. Sitting upon golden clouds in front is the Holy Trinity and close by our Beloved Lady; next are the apostles and martyrs and all the saints, clothed in snowy raiment, with palms in their hands, singing the heavenly songs to the music of David’s harp. Then come the blessed dead; thy grandparents are also there and all our friends who have died. They have entered eternal bliss, yet their eyes are wet with tears, for one sorrow mars their joy: the knowledge that *we* are still suffering and in danger. They are all keeping vacant seats at their sides for their loved ones on earth. Now, Erlefried, think of a mother, waiting in heaven for her dear child. One by one the places are filled, but the seat beside her remains empty and her child does not come, although his life must long since have ended. At last in her anxiety she rises and goes to the dear God, who asks: ‘ Why weepst thou ? ’ And she tells Him that she can find no peace and would fain leave heaven to go and search upon the earth until she has found her boy. Therefore, my dear son, knowing ourselves and our loved ones saved from evil is eternal bliss! When I am no longer with thee, remember that, and do not forget me! ”

Erlefried wiped the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his coat, then turning to his mother, he said that if God would only leave the stars in the sky, he would surely find some way to heaven.

Good child! There are many stars, but they are not all in the sky.

CHAPTER II

WINTER reigns in the mountain forests. Although the Germans dearly love the melodious, blossoming spring, they are happier in the midst of a long, cold winter. The earth, still and sombre, seems to have fallen from the sky—the cool, frozen *Nifelheim*.¹ The wide stretch of meadow-land, usually covered with plant life, with streams, hillocks, and rocks, is now one even plain under its thick blanket of snow. And the knotty branches of the northern trees, the pines, larches, and firs, which at other seasons extend as if in blessing over the earth, whose flowers and fruits reappear each spring to gladden the heart of man, bend under their burden of snow.

At first the branches toy with the falling flakes, light as pollen, and rejoice when the flying wanderers settle upon their needles, as the gay butterflies have done during the warm, sunny days. And they gently rock their little guests until others, attracted by the pleasant motion, join the first, clinging more and more firmly to the needles, in which they build a downy nest, that extends from twig to twig; soft

¹ *Nifelheim*: The mist world, the realm of cold and darkness (Norse Mythology).

and dainty as a cushion, but heavy as sand, it bends and forces the boughs downward with its weight. Thus the trees now stand enfettered in their white bonds, but proud and defiant withal, like true sons of the northern forest; and although seeming indifferent to their heavy ermine mantles, they appreciate the warmth and realise the new dignity of their appearance.

Bordering the meadows stand the other trees, the sturdy maples, the smooth, delicate beeches, and the bushy oaks, proud as peacocks, believing that they have a lease of all German land. But they come from the Slavic forests, where bears and boars abound. Back to the boars on your moors! We, the pines, are children of German soil, descended from the rugged Alps. Yonder on the edge of the forest stands an ash-tree, the origin of which is uncertain; but the legend is extant that from out the mouldy interior of the primeval ash emerged the human race, crawling upon the ground like worms. During the summer, however, the deciduous trees with their feathery foliage are beautiful to look upon, and in the autumn, when the forest is preparing for its holy winter rest, these trees make one more magnificent display in their gorgeous robes of red and gold. Oh, the coxcombs! But that is their last chance for ostentation. The first breath of winter destroys all their splendour; and how unlovely are the dry, bare branches, bending and swaying in the wind, until they receive their covering of snow. The flakes flutter tauntingly about the pitiable skeletons, where even a weary sparrow

will rest but a moment. The trees stand there in their misery, proving how helpless and foreign they are in the German forests. In the presence of these wretched creatures, the pines, in their ermines, may be pardoned for their pride.

Yonder is a little hillock, topped with a dome, under which a young pine is dreaming of a midwinter day in the distant future when it may leave its snowy bed to delight children's hearts with its brightly illuminated branches. For there comes a time in German lands when, like stars gliding down through the wintry mists, moving torches appear at night, carried from mountain and valley to the church, to celebrate the birth of our Lord,—as the coming of the spring is celebrated by the arrival of the birds from the sunny south.

And thus the endless covering of snow is spread over forest and meadow, and the pines stand, with their countless white spires and turrets, like a great Gothic cathedral. Over the valleys hangs a grey mist, but high above gleams the wide circle of rugged mountains; to-day it is not their rocky sides that glitter in the sunlight, but the snow still clinging to the steepest precipices,—the snow which to-morrow Odin's breath will loosen and send thundering into the abyss below.

“Winter's shroud” is a name invented by thoughtless man. Has no one ever yet experienced how refreshing, how inspiring, how life-giving, how comforting and cheering is a walk through a wintry landscape? Has no one inhaled the cool breath of the falling flakes, that enter our very being and

soothe our nerves, and is purer than the breath of summer leaves or the fragrance of blossoms? Has no one been sensible of the sweet repose in which the plant and animal kingdoms, weary of their conflict with life, have sunk under their light covering of snow? Has no one thought of the young forces, continually gathering and developing beneath it, which, in a few short months, will produce a new world of splendour before our eyes? Like a soft blanket of spun silk has winter been spread by Mother Nature over the cradle of spring.

The German visionary often indulges in such winter phantasies as these. But it was otherwise with Wahnfred on the day when, with a heavy bundle and gun fastened on his back, he worked his way upward through snow and underbrush from out the gorge of the Rabenkirche to the summit of the Trasank, where the territory of Trawies ends and the Ritscher forest begins. The Ritscher is a part of the Birstling and the Tärn forests, for they all belong to the same mountain chain, though it is on a higher level and spreads itself over an immense plateau, gradually rising towards the rocky heights. To-day this forest is nearly destroyed and most of the streams, once so numerous, are exhausted. At the time of this story there was no path through this desolate mountain region, which was avoided and feared on account of its beasts of prey. The beeches and oaks were luxuriant and of immense size—a giant race. Here the wood-pecker, the vulture, the eagle, and whatsoever was able to live by conflict reigned supreme.

Such was the region whither Wahnfred was now going. This man, like the rest of his race in those days, did not understand nature as we of the present generation understand it. He feared the Alpine storms, the torrents, the avalanches; and the wildness, which we call beauty, was to him oppressive and terrible. At that time Nature had no soul; it was left for man to embue her with his own; and the larger the heart of him who contemplates her, so much more meaning does she have for him.

Wahnfred was unconsciously filled with a desire to be absorbed in nature; he saw that his life had been a failure, although at present he thought of nothing but flight and of saving himself for a voluntary penance. He breathed more freely when he reached the summit, where about him lay the snowy brightness of winter. He looked back over the narrow valley of the Trach, branching off from the cliffs of the Trasank and winding through steep, wooded hills beyond, to the dim, blue, cone-shaped Johannesberg, to the left of which was the Gestade. Opposite is the Rockenberg and above the trees rises a curling thread of smoke from the house of the fire guardian. Where the valley widens, towers from out the mist the jagged edges of a cliff—the Dreiwand. Yonder is Trawies. Yonder, Wahnfred, lies the stiff, cold body of a man who is a greater enemy to thee in death than he ever was in life! Farther to the left, connecting with the mountain chain on this side, is the blue Tärn. In this region stands Bart's house, where a homeless woman and a fatherless child have taken refuge.

A thrill passed through the man and his feet turned involuntarily towards the Tärn; but he had been warned, he knew that bailiffs were searching from house to house, and that his return would plunge, not himself alone, but his family, yes, the whole parish, into the greatest danger.

Wahnfred deplored his deed—it had stirred his innermost being, as the eruption of a volcano stirs the bowels of the earth; but he did not regret it. He resolved to keep himself in concealment and to wait for the time when without danger he might return to his valley, to consecrate his whole life to the forest parish of Trawies. The first part of his mission was accomplished; the evil which had been bringing ruin upon them was removed; the second part, the restoration of peace and prosperity, remained for him yet to fulfil.

He now turned and entered the wintry wilderness. The path was almost level. The deep snow between the trees bore his weight in places and in others broke under its burden, often causing him to sink to his shoulders, and it was with difficulty that he extricated himself. He made but little progress and finally became so exhausted that he sank into the snow and stars swam before his eyes in circles. "This, then, is the end," he thought.

But he revived, his limbs strengthened by the snow and the sun shining so brightly over the tree-tops. Wahnfred then reflected how he could devise means to proceed on his journey. In the evening the snow would freeze and bear his weight. But who could wander here in the night without going

astray ? There remained but one thing for him to do. Cutting boughs from a pine-tree with his axe, he wove them into two flat discs which he bound upon his feet. With these he now advanced. The snow cracked under him, but did not break. He cut his way through thickets and fallen trees. He walked through forests so dense that no snow had reached the ground ; he passed over desolate clearings where stood but few trees, their broken branches dangling as the wind had left them. He could no longer see the region of Trawies ; a strange horizon, all forest and winter, met his view. Only a few peaks of the Trasank gleamed like gold above the hills.

At last he reached a little stream gurgling through the sand over its pebbly bottom, its wavelets glistening like tiny mosaics. Our wanderer was now on the right path, which followed this stream in the direction of the hermitage. A vulture now and then fluttered up, alighting on the branches above him, and Wahnfred saw that he would not be alone. He noticed tracks in the snow almost obliterated by marks resembling those left by a broom, as though some other fugitive had passed this way, who also had reason for destroying his footsteps. He knew the miscreant ; it was the wolf with the bushy tail.

When the sun had passed its meridian, Wahnfred seated himself upon a bare stone projecting out of the snow, to eat his midday meal. Resting his head on his hand, he gazed thoughtfully into the distance. To be so far from man, one lonely soul

between the frozen earth and the relentless sky—deserted, forgotten, lost!

The lids gradually closed over his weary eyes and he slept.

Upon a branch of a larch-tree sat a snow-bunting, cocking its little head on one side and looking down at the sleeper, as though in astonishment at the strange intruder. In the thicket yonder glittered the greenish eyes of a fox.

Suddenly Wahnfred started with a shudder and sprang from his seat, staring wildly about him. He did not see the bird, he did not see the fox; he was looking for another and feared to see Him. He had heard a voice in his dream: “Cain, where is thy brother?”

CHAPTER III

WAHNFRED proceeded on his way. The effort of walking had somewhat calmed his excited brain. At last he arrived at a high, perpendicular wall of rock, which cut off his path and over which dashed the gurgling stream. The old ladder that the men of Trawies had found when they came to carry away the body of the hermit was no longer here. It was scarcely possible to make the circuit of this long stretch of wall, for it reached far into the wilderness. Along the waterfall, where the ice had formed in masses, Wahnfred cut steps and swung himself to the summit. The first thaw would melt the steps and the wall would protect him like a fortress against his pursuers.

The way was now less difficult, ascending gently through the forest or over clearings. Wahnfred frequently heard a loud, baying sound, at which everything defenceless in the forest fled.

When the crust of the snow had become hard once more and the sun had sunk behind the bluish wall of trees, the wanderer noticed on the banks of the stream a triangular stone, placed there to mark the path. Here he turned to the left, forced his way through a thicket and up a hill, where the

ground was strewn with moss-covered stones, then descended towards the valley into a wide basin surrounded on one side by forest, on the other by precipices, and containing but few trees. He was at the foot of a bare, rocky mountain called the Donnerstein. And now Wahnfred had reached his goal.

Under a group of pines, whose branches were intertwined with one another, and whose weather-beaten tops reached far up into the sky, stood the hermit's cell.

It was strongly built and little resembled a cell; the beams were so massive that a man could have scarcely embraced them; the steep roof was made of stout logs, so that neither beasts of prey could enter nor falling trees destroy it. The wood was as hard as rock—a wood seldom seen in our days. The windows were few in number and they were closed by bars on the inner side. To find the entrance one was obliged to go around the hut; at the back, where the low, overhanging boughs formed a dense thicket, was the narrow, heavy door, still bolted as the men of Trawies had left it at the hermit's death.

It was unknown who had built this hut in the wilderness; it, together with the hermit, had been discovered many years previous by the fire guardian, when, as beater, he was accompanying a hunting party from the cloister. The hermit, on his knees, had implored him not to disclose his abiding-place. The fire guardian promised and had kept his word. Every three years he had ascended to the Ritscher forest to look after the man, who, like

a true hermit, lived on herbs, roots, and prayer. His appearance was wild, his hair and beard unkempt, and he had nearly lost the use of his speech. He had shown no annoyance at the visits of the man from Trawies, and when the latter had become convinced that this human creature was in need of no aid, or rather that he scorned it, he had returned with a lightened heart to his distant valley. At his last visit he had found the man dead, the body in a position which terrified him and which he had never betrayed to a human being; nevertheless, the hermit had been carried to Trawies for Christian burial in the churchyard. But the fire guardian did not forget the hut in the Ritscher forest, and when it became necessary to send Wahnfred to a place of safety, he had chosen this asylum.

Wahnfred now entered the house, shuddering at the mouldy atmosphere which greeted him. Throwing open the windows, he built a fire, and as the flames crackled, proclaiming the sacred presence of Vesta, the Goddess of the Hearth, he was comforted.

The fireplace was larger than one would expect to find in the hut of an eater of herbs and roots and it was well built, having even a kind of chimney for the escape of the smoke. Close by was a couch of moss, a praying-stool before the crucifix on the wall, a table, a cabinet, and a number of other articles accumulated by the hermit. The smoothly tiled walls, the glass in the windows, and the well made floor were unusual in a hermitage. Wahnfred unpacked the provisions and the few other things

which he had brought with him, set his gun in one corner, where it would always be ready, and made himself as comfortable as possible, that he might rest after his fatiguing journey.

When the fire had died down he still sat staring into the glowing embers. And now, scarcely two hours since his arrival in this house, he began to feel the horror of loneliness, the longing for his dear ones. Then, for the first time, as though it arose from the fire, appeared to him the vision of that scene at the altar in all its horrible reality. In the night he creeps into the sacristy, following the priest. In a corner, behind the large wardrobe containing the priestly vestments, he stands like a black pillar in the darkness. At the ringing of the little bell he strikes the cross with his right hand, while with his left he convulsively grasps the axe beneath his cloak. As the priest is elevating the Host, the thought comes to him: "I will not do it!" But as he sees the chalice through the half-open door, another thought follows the first: "Christ's blood! Blood must flow to redeem the world!" At the *Agnus dei* he beats his breast and prays that neither hatred nor a feeling of revenge shall guide his arm. And when he sees the priest bowed in humility to partake of Christ's body, he is filled with pity and love, rejoicing that this spirit has entered the heart of the man at the altar, for only thus would his own deed be sanctified. With outstretched arms the priest turns towards the people and the choir sings: "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord." Wahnfred opens the outer door

and takes his place by the entrance through which the priest must pass from the altar. The latter, taking the sacred vessels, descends the steps and approaches the door. Seizing the axe with both hands, Wahnfred moves back a few paces, then falls upon his victim. A cry burst from his lips as he now sat by his lonely hearth, his face buried in his hands, for again he saw the look which the dying man had given him, and again he saw the body falling upon the steps and the soul entering the flames. Had he perhaps sent a man to hell? As the murderer of a soul he trembled and groaned before the glowing embers.

Utterly exhausted with fatigue and excitement, he at last fell asleep.

And thus began his solitary life. The cheerful fire on his hearth, which he never allowed to be extinguished, was his only companion and friend. Ravens circled about the group of pine-trees over the spot where the smoke ascended. At night the wolves howled and the sleepless Wahnfred often heard the belling of the deer, fleeing from their pursuers. Several times a day he went out to gather wood or to fetch water from a spring in a crude bucket which he had found, or to investigate his surroundings; and frequently he took his gun to look for game, seldom returning without booty. This man, usually so filled with forebodings, played with his fire without a suspicion that below in Trawies the fatal lots were being drawn from the chalice. He slept quietly during that hour when in the church death was demanding its victims at the

altar, in revenge for his deed. Once, as he was sitting on a stump in front of his hut, gazing over the distant snow-fields or up into the grey sky, he suddenly fancied that he heard the bells of Trawies. They sounded strangely, each of the three bells being quite distinct, but when he sprang from his seat to listen, the ringing had ceased. The old chronicle states: "*Das seynd gewest die Klocken von Trawies, so verbannet worden, gleichsamblich in die Wildnussen entfleuchend*" ("Those were the bells of Trawies, fleeing from the outlawed village into the wilderness").

The time was now approaching when all Christendom celebrates the festival of the birth of our Lord. Wahnfred did not know the exact day, for while in concealment at the fire guardian's and in the wilderness, he had lost track of the time. But even in his loneliness and isolation he was filled with a longing to join in the prayer on that night when Christians are kneeling in adoration before the Christ Child. On the road that leads us Godward, we may all meet in spirit while repeating the Lord's Prayer, this prayer, which, like the roar of the storm or the song of birds, is heard over the entire earth. But Wahnfred—the outcast—was separated, not only by space, but also by time, from all mankind.

At that period the faithful still considered the Christmas festival, not like ourselves, as the one voluntarily chosen and appointed, but as the real birthday of our Lord. Wahnfred at last fixed upon a day. In the morning, armed with a stout stick, he left the house. The air was cold, the sky cloud-

less, the snow frozen and hard. He strode over the wide clearing and climbed the precipice to the summit of the Donnerstein, from where he could look far out into the land beyond. The region of Trawies lay too deep, but the high cliffs of the Tra-sank, the summit of the Johannesberg, and a corner of the Tärn forest were visible. Beyond were the dim, blue plains. Out there were churches and monasteries preparing for the night's celebration! Out there lived people who, with a song of praise in their happy hearts, were going forth to the holy festival! Every house had become a temple, in every family the bonds of affection had been deepened.

Thus it had always been at the Gestade, where now a charred ruin rose out of the snow.

Then, on this day at the setting of the sun, a peculiar atmosphere had seemed to spread over the landscape. In the lengthening shadows had lain a wondrous magic; the brooks, beneath their icy covering, ceased their murmuring, and in the forest no human voice was heard. It was as if Nature, in anticipation of the holy festival, had laid her finger upon her lips: "Silence! Silence!"

But to-day! To-day was like all other days in midwinter. In Wahnfred the childlike mood was wanting and he feared that he had mistaken the time. He was not yet conscious of the fact that for those unfortunates who have committed a sinful deed, the child's heaven on earth is over for ever.

When in the country beyond twilight had fallen, the sun still shone brightly upon the summit where

Wahnfred was standing. He then thought: "If someone out yonder should raise his eyes, he would see the Alpine glow on these distant heights, but he would not imagine, nor could he know that here, on this cold, lonely, glittering spot, an outcast is standing, celebrating this festival with a reverent heart. In remembrance of this Holy Day, I set up an altar on this mountain, which I now name the *Christtag-berg* (Christmas Mountain)."

With his stick he wrote the words in the snow and then descended to his hut. After putting his possessions in order, he lighted and cleaned the room, and in lack of other decoration fastened pine boughs upon the roughly hewn cross. He hardly knew how best to satisfy the inner longings of his heart.

That night he did not go to bed. He replenished the fire constantly and the flames roared and crackled. And then he thought of his wife and child. At the side of the hearth he now set up two little lighted torches on a stone,—the one his wife, the other his child. As they were dying out, he turned away his face, to avoid seeing which was first extinguished. Thus love itself tormented him. He tried to recall the pictures of Bethlehem, but now his heart was cold. Another picture, dark and bloody, blotted out the sweet idyl of the Orient; and the angels hovering in the air, who in previous seasons had proclaimed peace on earth, to-day blew on brazen trumpets.

Wahnfred perceived that he could not think and dream as formerly, nor could he be happy in his dreaming. He longed to hear a song which his

wife used to sing on Christmas eve, he longed for some religious book, he longed for his Bible. Had his predecessor in this cell been wanting in a soul? Had he spent his days in eating roots and herbs, and in kneeling before the cross? Had he left no trace behind him of an intellectual life?

Wahnfred rummaged once more in the cabinet, where he had found only a haircloth garment, a few rosaries, and other ordinary articles; he then searched in the dry moss of his couch, in which he discovered between two little boards tied together with a string—a package of manuscript. This was something unusual. In that age there were not many people who could read, and the art of writing was known only in the monasteries, castles, and cities. Trawies, however, was a notable exception. The spirit of independence which had always obtained in this forest parish knew well that the arts of reading, writing, and reckoning were a necessity for all who wished to control their own land. And one learned in these arts now held the manuscript in his hand.

Wahnfred replenished the fire and seated himself before it, turning over the pages and reading. The contents stirred his soul to its depth; his eyes began to glow with a strange light, until at last he sprang to his feet, crying: "This is the truth!"

It is impossible to repeat the exact words, for the papers have been destroyed. They had evidently been written by a visionary. Living a life of wretchedness, caused by his own sins, he had endeavoured to hold God and the world responsible,

had rebelled against human laws and also against those that we call sacred. He had evolved a creed of his own, which at first seemed to satisfy him, but which at last had proved his ruin.

Written at the top of the first page, with the sarcastic humour of one condemned to death, were the words: "Revelations of a Pious Hermit." The purport of the contents was as follows:

In the beginning, God created heaven. The chief of all the angels, beset by evil and envy, spread his wings and deposited an egg in heaven, whereupon God cast out the wicked angel, together with his egg. This was of great size and hovered in the air; its interior, filled with fire and brimstone, was called hell. As the egg revolved, exposing its exterior to the warmth of the sun, all kinds of life appeared upon its surface, plants, animals, and human beings, and the outside of the egg was called earth. The wicked angel, who was the devil, cast the soul of every man that died on the earth into the flames of hell. God then rose in His wrath and cried: "Thou art unjust to cast innocent beings into the everlasting fire!" To which the devil replied: "What is that to Thee? I made the egg, it is mine! Didst Thou not curse me and thrust me out from heaven, saying: 'It is Mine! It is Mine!'" And God replied: "The egg may belong to thee, but the beings upon it belong to Me; for My sun has warmed and developed them, I have spoken to them through My stars, they have rejoiced in My light and listened to My voice." The devil answered: "What! Thy sun which does not shine

at night! Thy stars that do not gleam by day! The heat of the inner fire has penetrated through the soil and warmed and developed the race. Their blood and their passions are heated by my fire. The wheat grows upon my fields and I will harvest it." Realising the truth of the devil's words, God said: "Well and good! Let us divide. Thou mayest keep the plants and animals and I will take the human beings." "How sly Thou art!" cried the devil. "Thou mayest keep the plants and animals, for it is the human beings that I especially desire!" And God said: "Let us not contend! We will leave the decision to man himself. He is sensible of the warmth of thy hell, he feels and sees My sunlight; with his feet he stands upon the earth; with his eyes he gazes heavenward. He shall choose. Is he attracted by thy fire, does he abandon himself to the fruits of thy earth, he is thine. If he rejects thy heat and despises the good things of thy kingdom, then is he Mine." "What!" cried the devil. "If he rejects my fire and despises the blessings of the earth, he cannot live!" "Yes," said God, "he will die; he will flee into the wilderness to escape thee; he will turn his eyes heavenward, preferring death to life. For the more he is filled with hatred towards thee and love for Me, just so much the more will he long to leave the earth and come to Me. And when he has grown so unselfish that he is willing to himself cut the bloody fetters that bind him to thee, then with a cry of joy will he fly into My arms, and with a cry of joy will I receive him!"

The second part of the manuscript which Wahnfred found in his couch of moss bore the title: "The Hermit's Confession."

It read as follows:

"If I write out my life's history, it is not to leave it to the world, to that kingdom of darkness; my wish is rather that it may fall into the hands of someone who, like myself, flees from the world and longs for rest. Another will hardly come to this lonely spot, in which case the manuscript will be destroyed and I shall carry my secret to God, Who, on account of my penance, will in His mercy pardon me.

"My ancestral castle stands two days' journey distant upon a rocky eminence, below which flows the great river. It is the only rock in the fertile land that, as far as the eye can see, is a part of our possessions. We are the Counts von Bechern, our forefathers going back to the court of the Roman Emperor, Karl den Becher. Concerning the deeds of our race, I will be silent; they are great only in the eyes of the world. My sin alone I will confess, imploring God's pardon with every breath.

"My father left two sons when he died, my brother and myself. My brother was the elder and the master at Bechern. His was an ardent, impetuous nature, and, urged on by the inspiration of the moment, he would often perform the most incredible acts. His passions were as hot as hell, his youth full of pleasures, and among the beautiful women in the earldom were few who did not suffer for his sins. Wrecked in body and in mind, my brother—

he was in his twenty-sixth year—fell seriously ill. Doctors and priests came to his bedside, the first to save his body, the second to save his soul. In the beginning he raved in delirium, then sank into a stupor, and one night, as we were assembled to perform for him the last offices, he raised himself in bed and with outstretched arms and upturned face cried with a loud voice: ‘ My God, my great, my only God! My beloved Jesus! My sweet, most holy Virgin M^{ary}! Take me to heaven! I despise this vile world! I thirst, I thirst for the kingdom of God!’ With these words he sank exhausted upon his pillow. The next day the crisis was past, my brother was convalescent. But when fully restored, his cheeks were no longer ruddy as before, his eyes had a deeper glow. And he then told me of his intention to alter his mode of existence and to lead thenceforth a solitary life, as the holy martyrs had done, serving God in penance and prayer.

“ I listened and did not oppose him and praised God for having enlightened his soul. He left the castle and withdrew into the depths of the wilderness to a substantial hermitage which had been built for him. He furnished it with many comforts, thinking that with agreeable surroundings he would take a greater pleasure in serving God and winning heaven than would be the case if living in misery and in want. He dismissed the workmen, after requiring of them an oath of secrecy concerning his place of abode. And then began his life of penance.

“ I praised my pious brother; I was now master in the castle and earldom. And I too revelled in

those pleasures which my brother had enjoyed, not in rioting and drunkenness as he had done, but deliberately and calmly, thus corrupting my very soul. I loved a beautiful lady in one of the neighbouring castles, who received me with favour as Count von Bechern. What a pleasure it was, with my lady at my side, to roll along over the broad roads drawn by four, or sometimes six, magnificent black steeds! What joy it gave me, seated on my charger, to gallop over the country, observing how respectfully everyone greeted the Count! I had all I could wish to satisfy youth and ambition. One brought up from childhood to rule, and already familiar with the thought, cannot appreciate the happiness that I experienced as young master of Bechern. And how splendidly my future unrolled itself before my eyes!

“ One day, after many months, my brother reappeared. His sojourn in the wilderness had given him little satisfaction; it was dreary and monotonous; the diet of roots and herbs was injuring his health, so he had decided to return to his castle, there to continue his religious life. He thanked me for my administration of his affairs in the earldom during his absence.

“ What my answer was I do not remember; but what I thought and felt, that I have never forgotten. Rather die than be deposed!

“ Not until the following day was I sufficiently calm to approach the man who had so inconsiderately crossed the path of my happiness.

“ ‘ Brother,’ I said, ‘ that of which I wish to

“ speak, let us discuss quietly, as is fitting for gentlemen. One of us two is superfluous here! ”

“ Understanding me perfectly, he replied: ‘ If thou, my dear brother, hast not room enough in our ancestral castle, then give me thy hand and go thy way. ’

“ ‘ Not so, ’ I answered. ‘ I am master at Bechern. Thou hast relinquished all claim to these possessions, and a gentlemen does not break his word. ’

“ ‘ To whom have I given my word ? ’

“ ‘ To me, in that thou hast deserted our father’s inheritance, leaving it without a lord and protector. I have defended it before the enemy, so by right it belongs to me. And thou hast given thy spoken word to God to renounce the world ! ’

“ ‘ Art thou counsellor for God ? ’ asked my brother. ‘ Wilt thou hold me responsible for that promised in delirium ? ’

“ ‘ Villain ! ’ I cried, ‘ thou art still in delirium ! ’

“ ‘ This is too much ! ’ he shouted, drawing his sword from its sheath.

“ Springing back a step, I seized my dagger ; we fought ; he fell—and I was master of Bechern.

“ I tried to resume my former life, but all was now changed ; my pleasure in it I was obliged to simulate ; I was unhappy and miserable. I endeavoured to find comfort in the arms of my lady, but she repulsed me, telling me that murderers she did not love.

“ ‘ My brother fell in a duel ! ’ I cried.

“ ‘ Who can prove it ? Who witnessed the deed ?

He stood in your way—you meant to kill him and you succeeded!’

“ I was silent, for I have never disputed the truth. She had spoken aloud that for which my conscience had been reproaching me. I was master of Bechern, but my lady fled from me, despised me. My subjects greeted me fawningly, but with a sneer, and I read in every eye that I was regarded as a murderer. At night I was tormented by horrible dreams and visions. I fought against them; I gave alms and ordered masses for my brother’s soul. All in vain! My burden became more and more unbearable. I had closed the apartment where my brother had fallen; but now the entire castle filled me with terror. Trembling in fear of ghosts, I myself wandered about like a ghost.

“ Enduring it as long as I could I finally relinquished everything. Relatives and friends took charge of my possessions, declaring me to be a fool. Taking with me an old retainer, I fled. When he asked where we were going, I laughed him in the face. ‘ Away from mankind, away from everything, away from myself!’

“ The man looked at me sadly, then told me that for one in my condition he knew of a suitable place.

“ ‘ The sepulchre!’ I cried.

“ ‘ The cell,’ he answered.

“ ‘ The cloister, where everyone takes his sin?’

“ ‘ I swore to your brother,’ said the man, ‘ not to betray the hermitage which he had built for himself in the wilderness. But since he no longer lives, I feel free to reveal the secret to you.’

“ ‘ The hermitage that my brother built in the wilderness ? ’ At first I was horrified at the thought, but the more familiar I grew with it, the lighter became my heart. Yes, that should be my expiation. I resolved to live in my brother’s cell as hermits live, performing penances and prayers until the murder was atoned.

“ ‘ Very good, friend,’ said I, ‘ take me there, and provide me with the barest necessities; then go, go where you will; you are free; all that I ask is that you shall not betray my place of abode. I wish to be alone.’

“ And so he brought me up here through the endless forest to this hut. I trust that God, in His mercy, will grant my brother a happy resurrection, but my hermit’s life has been more genuine than his. I cannot say exactly how many years I have lived here; I only know that I am old. The struggle which I have made against the temptations of the world is a great one and it is not yet over. God has revealed to me truths that have become my guiding star, which will lead me to heaven. The flight from the devil, the contempt of this world, the mortification of the flesh, the longing for God, the voluntary breaking of the fetters—that is the path marked out for me. I have been successful in traversing nearly the whole of it, but before this last step I stand in awe.”

So much of the manuscript Wahnfred retained in his memory. There were also many other strange, incomprehensible ideas. Especially towards the end were visible ever-increasing signs of a disordered

brain. The outer world, his mode of life, his fortunes and various adventures during all these years, were hardly mentioned. It was the outcry of a struggling soul. Complaints and self-reproaches were gradually silenced, peace and contentment always found expression; the last pages were written in a mood of ecstasy.

Wahnfred, who was deeply impressed by the "Confession," exclaimed on finishing it: "This is the truth!" It was long past midnight; the fire was nearly extinguished; wolves howled in the forest, but Wahnfred, buried in his reading, did not hear them.

"That shall be my model! What he expiated have I also to expiate and still more. I will tear away one fetter after another binding me to this earth, where I have been tempted to sin. The parish?—it is only a community for the enjoyment of earthly blessings; no matter how many sacrifices are made for it, not one of them will lift it to God. My family?—they too must renounce this earthly life. If I live and care for them, they will not do this. If I go on in advance to show them the way, they will follow. My wife, my child, ah, how I love you both! If it only were not love which held me enchained—love, the work of the devil! These fetters must be broken! I will leave a sign behind me, that we may find each other in heaven."

Such were the thoughts of our poor Wahnfred, and although they did not ripen to resolve, yet they filled his distracted brain.

We of to-day regard, if not with scorn, yet dubi-

ously, these religious rhapsodies, such as our ancestors, the seekers for heaven, experienced, when, in distress and with sore hearts, they sought refuge with God. Yet how incomparably more despicable are those of the present generation who, in their wisdom, deny the very existence of God, or that an Almighty Helper and Saviour of mankind is to be found in heaven or on earth! They also declare that man, a mere plaything of Chance, chooses the more expedient, if perhaps not the best course, by benumbing his senses with the pleasures of this world, thus avoiding too deep a sympathy with the misery surrounding him,—a misery from which death alone can release us. The goal is the same to-day as then, but in that age an intense ideality cast its magic rays over the path of the sons of earth.

Wahnfred's path was not the normal one, even at that time. His brain filled with thoughts of suicide, he dreamed himself into the life of the Count von Bechern. Such is the danger of a solitary existence. At first, the mind escapes from its ordinary channels, then falls into the abyss, dragging the body with it.

A few weeks passed after this unhappy Christmas and Wahnfred was still thinking seriously of suicide. Whenever the horrible vision in the church at Tra-wies rose before his eyes he found comfort in the thought. "Blood for blood!" saith the Holy Writ.

CHAPTER IV

IN the early days of February the horizon became so clear that Wahnfred, standing upon the summit of the Donnerstein, could see over the top of the forest the heathland with the " Five Pines," the hill-country beyond with its broad valleys and towns, as well as the whole region with its rugged mountain ranges which he now beheld for the first time. A light breeze was loosening the last flakes from the trees, thus left standing bare and black on the white ground beneath. The sky was covered with masses of soft grey clouds, the air was moist, and as Wahnfred walked over the snow, it broke under his weight.

The wolves had ceased their howling, for they were no longer hungry. The game which they pursued, being unable to escape, had become easy prey. Wahnfred had shot a large deer, thus providing himself with meat for some time.

During one of these nights he was suddenly awakened from his sleep by a peculiar roaring that shook the very house. Fearing a freshet, he sprang to his feet. As he opened the door, a strange whistling sound above the roof met his ear. Still heavy with sleep, he stepped outside and something like the lash of a switch struck him in the face,

“Who is there?” he called aloud, but the roaring and whistling continued and Wahnfred crossed himself in terror.

The wind now raged in the pines about the house, now yonder in the trees on the edge of the forest, and at last he realised that it was a storm. Retiring to his hut, he built a fire; even the flames flickered strangely, and in Wahnfred the remembrance of his deed, the consciousness of his misery were powerfully stirred. In the roaring, hissing wind he heard the moaning of ghosts. Down from the Trasank floated pale, misty phantoms carrying torches giving no light, only blue, tremulous flames. One of the veiled figures held aloft a chalice overflowing with blood, which, shaken by the wind, dripped to the earth. Then followed dark forms bearing upon a high black bier the murdered priest.

Wahnfred sprang to his feet. “An end to this!” he cried. “I am ready! If it be God’s will, let Him take me, but my own hand revolts! I cannot be guilty of more death myself! Oh, if one of the pine-trees would only fall and crush me, with a cry of joy would I die! Above the Ritscher forest destruction has broken loose; I hear the branches crashing, the trunks breaking. I will go out.”

And when morning dawned he left the house. He carried neither stick nor axe nor any other weapon; he often broke through the snow, but extricated himself again and finally he entered the forest. Here the storm was playing havoc in a group of trees; the branches were swaying as if to ward off the blows, the tops bending this way and that to

elude them. One of these trees, the largest, the oldest, the father of the rest, snapped and fell with a crash, plunging into the snow, completely burying its trunk.

The whole forest was in an uproar; for a moment there was a lull, then, struck by the force of the wind, the trees braced themselves for another blow, some resisting, others yielding. They seemed to be chasing and lashing each other in turn. The ground was strewn with trunks, boughs, and cones. Many a raven's nest was thrown down with the tree that bore it, while the birds fluttered about, screeching in their helplessness and despair.

Through this forest Wahnfred now walked. His head was bare—ready for the blow. He did not linger nor did he hasten; his pace was his ordinary one. He did not deliberately seek the falling trees nor did he turn aside to avoid them. The twigs of a breaking branch often grazed him, but he remained uninjured. The wilder the storm raged, so much the more eager was the light in his eyes. His path was frequently blocked by the fallen trees, but Wahnfred, the death seeker, remained untouched.

He forced his way through underbrush and broken tree-trunks; he crawled under and climbed over them. Where they had been torn up by their roots it was most difficult to proceed, and all the more for reason of the soft snow, into which he often sank to his shoulders. Seeing himself thus surrounded by the confusion of the ruined forest, with the wind raging in all its fury, he realised the horror of death.

He was leaning back against a mass of snow, wiping the sweat from his brow, at the same time shedding a tear over his unhappy life, when suddenly a wolf approached, creeping cautiously along a log directly in front of him. It was a large, thin creature, with matted hair and the greed of hunger in the fiery green eyes. Catching sight of the man, he stopped, pricked up his ears, and showed the gleam of his white teeth. He stood for a long time motionless, his tail drawn in, his forepaws firmly braced, his eyes blazing. As he realised the utter helplessness of the man in the snow, and was about to spring upon his victim, a heavy branch fell between them. The beast was terrified, and with a few long leaps he disappeared in the forest.

Wahnfred, revived by his fright, now gradually freed himself from his precarious position. He then proceeded on his way, his ears nearly deafened by the continuous howling of the wind. Never in his life had he experienced such a storm. When he was a lad of seven a hurricane had nearly destroyed the forest of Trawies. On that occasion the people had said, quoting from an old legend: "When the trees are shaken violently by the wind, someone is taking his own life." And soon afterwards it was discovered that a wood-cutter in the Trasank valley had hung himself to a tree. He was not buried in consecrated ground, but under the tree where he had met his death. Wahnfred's grandfather, the carpenter, then an old man on crutches, had said: "Every sin may be pardoned but that of suicide, for suicide cannot be expiated."

Wahnfred paused in his walk, thinking over his grandfather's words. The great, measureless love which, as a boy, he had had for this grandfather was reawakened and warmed his heart.

His moods were as changeable as storm and sunshine, and since Heaven itself seemed to protect him on this day, he took it for an omen and resolved to live on bravely, to return to the teachings of his forefathers, to find therein his expiation and salvation, and to burn the writings of the hermit.

Making a wide circuit, he returned in the direction of his valley, walking over clearings swept bare by the wind. Suddenly he heard a puffing sound which did not seem to come from the storm; turning quickly he saw the wolf—the same he had so recently encountered—about to spring upon him.

He had barely time to break a branch from a mouldering tree near by. He swung it with both arms. Merciful Heaven, what if that horrible vision should appear to paralyse his arm!—but no, the blazing eyes of the beast held him as if by magic; he waited a moment, and then, as with all his force he let fall the blow, the branch snapped and broke. The infuriated beast sprang upon him, thirsting for blood. With one turn of the hand, Wahnfred plunged the sharp point of the broken stick into the wolf's throat. The animal reared, the blood gushed forth, and with a death-rattle it rolled over on the ground.

Sinking exhausted upon a log, Wahnfred watched it until its struggles were at an end, then he laughed aloud. He who had come out in search of death,

firmly resolved upon his own destruction, had, within sight of the longed-for goal, defended himself with all his strength against this beast of prey.

The howling of wolves and the raging storm reminded him that he must hasten. Armed with a stout stick, he sped on his way towards his place of refuge, the wind from behind pushing him forward. While descending the Christtagberg he noticed smoke rising above the trees. A moment later he discovered his hermitage in flames.

The storm had broken one of the pines and thrown it upon the house, the heavy blow crushing in the roof. The fragments had dropped upon the burning embers on the hearth, the wind had fanned the fire, and now the flames were soaring into the branches of the trees.

As Wahnfred beheld this sight he fell into a kind of ecstasy.

“At last I know, O Lord,” he cried, “that Thou wouldst have me live! I have sought death, but with Thine Almighty Arm hast Thou saved me from it.”

Now he wished to live and could not. His scanty store of provisions was burned with his gun, the rest of his clothing, and his place of refuge. Helpless he stood there amid the roaring tempest. A sea of soft snow surrounded him far and wide, making escape, even with snow-shoes, impossible. He was tired and hungry and had nothing with which to refresh himself. All at once a beggar! Ah, if thou wert that, thou unhappy man! The trees would throw down their cones to thee.

How futile all that which thou hast planned! Heaven preserves us or destroys us as it will. Now destroy thyself!

He quenched his thirst with snow. From under the ashes of his hut he dug the half-charred remains of the deer and ate of them. The night he passed beside the glowing embers.

The storm died away. Thousands of trees lay about, still and ghastly. The mild air had melted much of the snow; should it freeze again, an escape from this forest, now grown so frightful and inhospitable, might be made. But where? What next? Wahnfred had not yet asked himself this question. At present he must keep up the fire and save as much as possible from the remnants of food. The odour of the roasted deer spread through the forest and the wolves came creeping up nearer and nearer to the smoking pile. Saving what he could, Wahnfred climbed into one of the largest pine-trees. And there he sat, the entire night.

He bound himself to the tree with a tough bough to keep from falling in his sleep. How palatial had been his dwelling below, now a heap of ashes, in comparison with this abode! His dangerous position wonderfully quickened his desire to live, and his hope yet to be reconciled with himself and with mankind was strengthened.

The night was still and cold. To keep from freezing he had woven a mantle of boughs for protection, his feet rested upon a branch, but sleep would not come. The stars were shining and the stillness which lay over the vast forest was almost appalling.

Soon after midnight, as his weary eyelids were beginning to droop, he fancied that he heard a shot. He started, but noticing no further sound, and as it was most improbable that any human being could be in the vicinity, he calmed himself and at last fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

AT the first gleam of dawn when the snow-buntings were twittering and the sun was spreading its golden rays over the snowy landscape, Wahnfred was still asleep. His feet had slipped from the branch and hung dangling from the tree. The mantle of boughs protected the sleeper, who was like one of those animals that crawl into a tree for its winter rest and wakens with the coming of the spring.

Wahnfred lay there in a refreshing slumber, as though in reality taking his winter rest, and possibly he might have slept on into the spring, into his eternal rest, had not a loud voice from below aroused him.

“ *O Herr Gott!* has this one hung himself too ? ”

“ Who is there ? ” called Wahnfred, hastily seeking to throw off his covering of boughs.

“ Are you still alive ? ” asked the voice. “ But, carpenter, what kind of a house have you got up there ? ”

It was the voice of the fire guardian.

“ Is it you, Gallo ? ” With these words Wahnfred climbed quickly down and sprang to the ground. But when he saw before him a bent,

white-haired, grey-bearded man, he thought that there must be some mistake.

“ Why are you looking at me in that wild way, Wahnfred ? don't you know me ? ”

“ How grey you have grown, fire guardian, since we last met ! ”

“ I 'll wager you also would have grown grey in these last two months down in Trawies. However, I see you are not living in the most comfortable way yourself. ”

“ Two days ago, during the storm, this tree which you see smouldering here fell upon my house, setting it on fire. But before we speak of anything else, Gallo, I want to beg you to forget my bitter words in the Rabenkirche — they have troubled me greatly. And now tell me what brings you to this place. ”

“ Something that concerns yourself, ” answered Gallo.

“ My wife, my child ! ” cried Wahnfred excitedly.

“ They live peacefully with Bart-from-Tärn. His house, you know, is high up in the forest. ”

“ How did you get up here in such a storm ? ”

“ I will tell you all about it, but first let us make a fire and eat our breakfast. You have probably not eaten yours yet. ”

“ For that, my dear Gallo, I should have needed Heaven's aid. ”

“ Never fear, for I have brought you something, ” he said, throwing down a bundle under the tree.

“ *Mein Gott!* Wahnfred, what if I had not come ! ”

“ If you were able to come up, I could have gone down.”

“ The road from Trawies into the Ritscher forest is horrible, but, my friend, the road from the Ritscher to Trawies is more horrible!”

He then began to build a fire from the fragments of wood and to unpack bread and brandy.

They ate and were silent, as if each were afraid to hear what the other had to tell.

“ Why did you not fetch the provisions from the Rabenkirche ?” asked Gallo at last.

“ Until my gun was burned I could provide myself with food.”

“ I went up several times, but as I always found the things undisturbed, I came here to see if you really had taken refuge in the hermitage, or if anything had happened to you. It took me over thirty hours to reach here from Dürbachgraben.”

“ How does it happen that you come from Dürbachgraben, fire guardian ?”

“ One can scarcely conceive what harm this storm has done,” said Gallo. “ The gorge of the Miesing resembles a heap of ruins, so many broken trees are lying about. The Trach is blocked with them; the water has risen in the glen, forming a lake as far as the Rabenkirche. A huge tree has fallen over my hut, but in such a way that it is supported by another, and we who live down under it are not safe for a single hour. How it is farther over in the Tärn, I do not know, but a flight of crows from that direction makes me suspect that their nests have been disturbed. How did I get up here through all

this havoc? I went around over the clearing on the Birstling. To be sure, I was obliged to crawl and climb much of the way, and I was surprised to find that the Ritscher forest, lying so high and giving the wind free course, had been so affected by the storm. I managed to reach the precipice, but you know the ladder is gone, so I was obliged to walk an hour out of my way, or I should have been here last evening. Night overtook me and I hid myself in a thicket, building a fire to keep from freezing. The wild beasts gave me no peace and we had some serious encounters,—perhaps you heard the shot. It was not far from this place and I was astonished this morning to find that I was here in the clearing—for I recognised the group of pines—and that I had been so near you all night. But how you can frighten a person when you let your feet dangle from a tree! It flashed across me at once that you had followed the example of your predecessor, the pious hermit. I did not tell of it at the time, for they would not have buried him in consecrated ground, but I found him hanging by a rope. And you, too, would rather not have known how the hermit had strangled himself with the cord of his rosary.”

“The man remained true to his principles,” murmured Wahnfred. “Gallo, what if you had found me in the same condition?”

“To-day it would be no longer necessary to conceal the fact.”

“But you would have done so from a sense of honour.”

“ No one has a word to say now about consecrated ground,” answered the fire guardian.

“ What do you mean by that ? ”

“ O my friend,” said Gallo, “ how shall I ever tell you! When we parted that day in the Rabenkirche, you resented the fact that we had plunged you into misfortune. You came up here to this peaceful spot, which is like a heaven compared with Trawies, that is now worse than hell. This year we have had no Christmas celebration and for a long time we have heard no bells and no organ music. Wahnfred, you are not to blame, nor are we; it was to be thus. Our earthly life has become a horror; our heaven has been taken from us! Wahnfred, our home has been placed under the ban! ”

At these words Wahnfred sprang from the log and stood there, a pale, rough-bearded man, his eyes fixed upon the unhappy messenger. At last he murmured: “ I think, Gallo, I must have misunderstood you.”

“ You have understood me perfectly, Wahnfred; I see that by your face.”

“ Tell me that the hurricane has torn up every tree by its roots, that it has ruined every house in Trawies, that it has killed the people or buried them alive, but do not tell me, fire guardian, that God has cast us off! ”

“ If the curse were the only thing,” replied Gallo, “ if the church alone were affected, I should not be so alarmed. We would return to pure Christianity. But the consequences—the lawlessness! And we seem to be outlawed as well as ex-

communicated. Every one has deserted us, even all civil authority."

"Fire guardian, this is terrible!"

"Already, my Wahnfred, everything is in the greatest confusion. On the one side, dire distress; on the other, utter license; no waggon leaves the place, no money comes in. The boundary lines are enclosed. Below, where the Tärn begins, the cord which they have stretched can be seen, wherever the storm has not broken it. But no storm will destroy the ban. The blacksmith's apprentice, being out of work, attempted to leave Trawies; at the "Five Pines" he was forced to return. The master wood-cutter from the Trasank valley started for Neubruck to attend to his money; on the outskirts of the town he was stoned to death. At first the people were awed, and many lay prostrate before the closed church door upon which the interdict was nailed. Could you have read it you would have been surprised to learn how priests can curse! But Sandhok has since torn down the paper. Upon the hill where we cross from the Freiwild brook to the Tärn,—you know the place,—in the hollow of a tree stood an image of St. Nicholas. 'We need no bishops now!' the people cried, and they destroyed the image. 'If we are cursed,' they continued to cry, 'then no saint can help us!' and they tore down the St. Sebastian by the Trach and the St. Catherine before the tavern. And the most savage among them even fell upon the images of the Virgin, and the words of one man are still ringing in my ears, as he shouted, 'If we already belong to the

devil, we need no cross and no God!'—and he destroyed the crucifixes. To be sure a few people have opposed this sacrilege. *Mein Gott!* their remonstrances have been in vain, they have been repulsed by the stronger party. Fights and quarrels prevail, making our existence terrible."

"And could you do nothing?" asked the horrified Wahnfred.

"Carpenter, the times are not what they were when the word of the fire guardian was respected. However, I was foolish enough to attempt to restore order. 'So then!' they cried; 'the old man who has led us into all this has still something to say! To-day is not yesterday, to-day the younger and stronger men shall rule. A council! We need no council; let each one take what he wants. Down with this rich peasant! We will have our share of his possessions!' At midnight they came—a rabble and mob such as I did not suppose could be mustered in Trawies; it seemed as if all at once every cutthroat and robber from far and wide were let loose there. At midnight they came with spades, scythes, and pitchforks. I started to waken my men and women,—it was unnecessary, they had already joined the mob, and they attacked me with my own tools. One old woman, half blind and lame, remained faithful, going with us when we were cast out from our home. She helped me carry my sick wife. My little daughter Sela was the only cool-headed one among us; it occurred to her that we could not go out in the darkness without a light, so she hastily lighted the lantern from the

glowing embers on the hearth; otherwise we should have lost our ancestral fire, for I had completely forgotten it. We went far into the gorge of the Dürbach, where we took refuge in a deserted hut. And there we are to-day and shall consider ourselves fortunate if they allow us even to live."

"This is joyful news which you bring me from the valley, fire guardian!" said Wahnfred, with the irony of inward rage. "But what of the others, can they do nothing?"

"Who?"

"Bart-from-Tärn, Firnerhans——"

"Firnerhans!" interrupted Gallo. *Jesus Maria!* Carpenter, you do not know—you do not know about it yet?"

"What more?" asked Wahnfred.

"But how should you know? The fogs that have come up here from Trawies, have they not been bloody? Did not the mountains tremble, when the horror occurred?—Firnerhans was one of them!"

"What do you mean, Gallo?"

"Your cousin, the wood-cutter from Tärn, was also one of them. There were eleven. With eleven heads have you been bought, Wahnfred! Condemned and beheaded in the church—O, my God, what a terrible world we live in!"

With this cry the old man broke down completely and covered his face with his cloak.

Wahnfred stood like a statue in the morning sunlight, his shadow lying across the snow. "Could this shadow have stood upright," says the old

chronicle, "it would have reached to the top of the highest tree."

"Fire guardian," cried Wahnfred suddenly, facing the old man with threatening mien and clenched fists, "why did you not send for me?"

"Kill me on the spot," muttered Gallo. "I should like that best of all. Not send for you! Even had I wished to break my oath, there was no time. And you could have done nothing. Tell me, you are not thinking of going to Trawies now!"

Wahnfred was silent.

"Take your wife and child and seek a new home under a new name!"

"You may do it, if you can!" answered Wahnfred, with a strange ring in his voice.

"I cannot," said Gallo; "I have grown old upon the land of my forefathers; I shall perish with my home. You are still young enough to found a home upon another soil, to forget the horrors which you have not witnessed, to earn your bread by the skill of your hands, and to lead a peaceful life."

But Wahnfred answered: "I will go to Trawies!"

"Oh, could you only go as Moses went down from Mt. Sinai, with a table of new laws!"

And Wahnfred said: "I will go!"

CHAPTER VI

FROM this isolated mountain region, the two men now descended. Their path was blocked, as if Nature had also pronounced her interdict, or as if a good spirit would prevent their return to the cursed valley. Through the gorges rushed and foamed a wild torrent, which proclaimed the breaking up of winter; a warm wind brought down a gentle rain and the peaks of the Trasank were hidden by a fog.

They took a circuitous route towards the forest of the Tärn. Wahnfred longed to reach Bart's house to see his wife and child. When he perceived the thin blue smoke rising from behind the trees, his cheeks glowed and his eyes sparkled, as on that day, now far distant, when as a lover he had gone to the remote valley of the Trasank.

Suddenly he stopped, and seizing his tumbled mass of hair and rough beard with both hands, he said: "Gallo, could I not cut this off?"

"You must love your wife uncommonly well," replied the fire guardian, who, in spite of his seriousness, always had a spark of humour in him, "quite uncommonly well, to think so much of having a smooth face just now. But I think she will like you

even with the long beard, if that is the only bad habit you have brought from your hermitage."

"Oh, I am quite a different being from what I was up there. I feel so strangely warm and young, my Gallo, strangely young! How we can freeze at times! And how despairing and hard we can be against man and how unthankful to God! This rushing stream below us,—you must feel it too,—it will carry all evil away from Trawies. Spring is coming; we shall plough our fields in peace, mow our meadows, and graze our herds. It will be again as of old, and we shall see only the bright-eyed trees about us! Oh, come, Gallo, come! I could shout for joy!"

Pleased and excited he dragged Gallo with him towards the house. Suddenly they noticed a man hastening out to meet them, who motioned with his hand and called in a low, warning voice: "Come no farther! Into the woods, quick!"

It was Bart himself, and as he came up to them he pushed them back into the forest.

"What is the meaning of all this?" asked the fire guardian.

"The bailiffs," said Bart, almost breathless. "Wahnfred, the bailiffs are looking for you! You must not be discovered. They have learned that your family are with me and now they have been watching the premises for days, rightly guessing that you would return some time to see your wife and child. They have searched the house from top to bottom, overturning everything, and a sentinel constantly stands before the door."

“ No one shall block the way to my wife ! ” said Wahnfred, starting forward.

“ Wahnfred ! ” whispered the fire guardian, seizing him by the arm, “ you have lived without her for months, and you can endure it a short time longer ; do not be foolish ! ”

“ I will see my wife ! I will have my child ! They are in danger ! Bart-from-Tärn, speak the truth, the bailiffs are torturing them, carrying them off, killing them ! ”

“ They will not do that because they wish to use them as a decoy for you. But do not increase their peril, carpenter ; only think ! you would ruin both yourself and them. Go back to the wilderness ! ”

“ Never ! ”

“ Then hide until I call you. I will do my best to deceive the bailiffs. Yesterday over on the Karebene the skeleton of a man was found, left by the wolves. I will tell them it is that of the fugitive. Perhaps they will then go away. ”

“ I should think, ” said the fire guardian, “ that the authorities might have been satisfied to have ruined and cursed us and not still be searching for the murderer in Trawies. We belong to the devil now and have nothing more to do with them. Why don't you tell them that, Bart ? ”

“ We have a right to the protection of the government, ” said Bart, “ but excommunication from the Church means being partially outlawed, and we shall soon be entirely so. To tell the truth, my friends, it is already the case : we are as free as the birds in the air. ”

“ That is no news to me,” replied Gallo.

“ They have also tried to burn my house,” related Bart further, “ but on account of the decoy they have let it stand. They have only plundered my pantry. They call themselves soldiers and are of the same race as ourselves, but the mercy they show is about the size of a toad. Since they consider us damned they play the very devil with us. I should prefer the Turks.”

“ And you speak the truth,—they are doing no harm to my dear people ?” asked Wahnfred.

“ You would do them the greatest injury,” said Bart, “ were you to go to them now; the spies would kill you before their eyes.”

“ Why did not the boy come with you, Bart ? Why do you not tell me that my family are well ? Keep nothing back, Bart.”

“ You may believe me, carpenter, I wish the best for you. I know how we are indebted to you. As long as I live, your people shall not suffer, so far as man can prevent it. What God wills, we cannot prevent.”

“ Let us go now, Wahnfred,” said the fire guardian. “ I see the gleam of a bayonet down there. You cannot go back to the Ritscher forest—you would perish; so come with me to my hut in the Dürbach gorge. I will guard you as well as I can, and will bring you news from wife and child until you may see them. Come with me !”

“ No, friends, I cannot. Bart, you pass in and out of your house; you can see them. Lend me your clothes, that I may go disguised.”

He said it almost jubilantly, but his two companions warned him to take no chances by which he might lose everything.

“Go then! Go quickly, Bart. Go and tell them that—O my God, what shall you tell them? that they must think of their Wahnfred, must be happy, must sleep as Wahnfred will sleep. The winter is going fast and the first violet of spring I will bring to them. God bless them!” Sobbing he threw himself upon Bart’s breast. “God bless my wife!”

What a strange man! He could almost forget his family and now all at once he was overcome by the thought of them. With difficulty the fire guardian succeeded in getting him to his hut.

“It is not always good for a man,” said Gallo, on the way, “when his hands and feet follow his heart alone. To-day he goes where to-morrow he would not be; to-day he does that which to-morrow he regrets.”

“It is useless to talk, fire guardian,” replied Wahnfred. “No clever words will help an inward pain.”

At last they arrived in the gorge. The water gushing from the clefts of the rocks and over the precipices was loud and boisterous. It resembled a brown flood pouring its rolling waves upon the uneven ground, its seething foam white as snow where it dashed over the stones. Here it was digging its way under the roots of trees; there, battling with some opposing obstacle or undermining a wall of snow, breaking down the huge mass which for a moment stemmed the flood, then, separating into

bits, sent it on its way again. Trunks of trees, their limbs broken by the wind, came floating down and crashed against the rocks. Masses of earth seemed to come to life, and were whirled along in the rushing, foaming stream by the unfettered forces of nature. Such is the tragic death of the still white snow. Must everything—even the gentlest and tenderest objects—at some time struggle in the deadly combat? If not in life, then in death!

The fire guardian walked as rapidly as was possible amid all the confusion of the ruined forest. Remembering that his hut did not stand far from the water, he would not have been surprised had the elements lent a helping hand to the Church in sending the curse upon them. They were obliged to climb over the precipices, for the path through the gorge had been destroyed by the flood. Now and then an avalanche would come tearing down beside them, bringing with it earth, trees, and shrubbery. Upon a high rock in the midst of all this chaos of rushing waters and broken trees stood Sela, the fire guardian's little daughter. Her blue gown shimmered through the dripping branches, and the foam of the dashing waves wrapped her in a soft mist. With one white hand she was clinging to an overhanging bough, while she bent over to pick some cress growing on the bank.

Her father called to her, asking what she was doing in that dangerous spot. The thundering noise drowned his voice and she did not hear him. Her little face was glowing as on that morning when she had accompanied Erlefried to the Midsummer Fes-

tival; her great wise eyes were as calm and gentle as if she were standing in the midst of a flower garden. As she picked the cress, she placed it in her skirt which she had gathered up in her hand. When she had plucked the last bit she gazed at the wild scene about her and down into the raging waters, roaring and plunging amid the ruins of the forest, but her eyes remained calm.

The two men watched the child, then Wahnfred, taking the hand of the fire guardian, said: "We are not lost."

All at once the girl discovered her father, and, nimble as a chamois, she sprang from stone to stone until she stood before him. Silent but happy, she nestled close to him, reaching to his breast.

"What art thou doing with the cress, Sela?"

"Mother's hands are hot," answered the child, "and her head is feverish. This cool cress will be good for her."

They soon arrived at the hut, which was in danger from the approaching water below and from the broken tree suspended above the roof. The girl went at once to her mother and whispered: "Father has come now." Then she laid the cooling green cress upon the hot hands and forehead of the invalid, gave her water to drink, and caressed her cheeks, regarding her tenderly with her gentle blue eyes. And this glance rested like a soft spring sky upon the wasted face of the woman, seeming to refresh her to the depths of her being.

When at last she fell asleep to behold her child's future in sunny dreams, or to prepare herself for

that everlasting sleep which knows no past and no future, Sela slipped away on` tiptoe and busied herself contentedly with putting things to rights and preparing nourishment for the invalid when she should awake.

The fire guardian had once said: " So long as the last angel has not left us, I will not give up Trawies."

Yes, old man, he who has a loving chiid should not despair of the world.

CHAPTER VII

WAHNFRED remained for weeks in the little hut of the exiled fire guardian. He watched the raging and then the gradual diminishing of the flood; he watched the last snow-banks melt and the meadows resuming their carpet of green. He also watched the quiet sorrow of the fire guardian for his dying wife, and the active little nurse, inexhaustible, never sad, brightening the whole house with her expressive eyes. She had never betrayed her knowledge of the danger in which they lived, and her silence on the subject her father took to be the confidence of childhood. So he was much surprised one day, when outside of the hut Sela said to him: "Mother says she will die, father, if thou dost not laugh again."

He did not laugh; he burst into tears on hearing this from his child. And Sela wept with him, and so bitterly that she was convulsed with sobs, and she struggled in vain to check the tears in which her long-repressed sorrow now found relief.

She finally went to the spring and bathed her face with cold water. She plucked a daisy, carried it into the hut, and, laying it on her mother's breast, said: "One has come already!" She then resumed

her cheerful mien, her eyes were once more calm, and the peace of childhood seemed again to take possession of her soul.

Wahnfred watched this woman and child and thought of his own dear ones. He had no suspicion that his wife also was declining, faithfully nursed by his little son. The carpenter's wife had grieved sorely over the flight and danger of her husband. She had confided to no one how her feeling of homelessness and her anxiety were gnawing at her very life, and at last she fell ill and was now failing rapidly.

The fire guardian was well aware of all this, but he dared not reveal it to Wahnfred, fearing that he would hasten to his dying wife and thus double her danger. Gallo always returned from his visits to Bart's house with favourable news; and Mistress Wahnfred had herself begged him to conceal her condition from her husband, that he might keep away and not fall into the hands of the enemy. For the spies still guarded the house more closely than ever, taking it for granted that the illness of the wife would entice the husband to her side.

These heartless wretches had the craftiness to reckon upon human emotions in others. Whenever a stranger—a pedlar, a wood-cutter, or a beggar—attempted to enter the house, he was thoroughly searched and knocked about so ruthlessly that he had no desire to return. Each bailiff had received a minute description of the fugitive; one of them had known the man personally in his younger days. Wahnfred's head was to be the price of their liberty. The one who caught him was from that moment to

be freed from military service. They were all heavily armed, for they realised that they were in the land of the enemy. They also knew that in consequence of the ban these woodspeople were deserted by all outside.

And so Gallo, on returning from his visits, always reported that the bailiffs were still there, and that Mistress Wahnfred had sent her greetings and word that her husband should run into no danger on her account. All the same, Wahnfred was constantly planning some way by which he could go disguised to his family; the thought had even occurred to him to raise a company of volunteers in Trawies and to take the house by storm.

“So far,” said Gallo, “you have allowed me to dissuade you from going to Trawies, and you need not regret it. You have heard the kind of news that comes to us in the Dürbach gorge; you have heard it, yet you can form no idea of the condition of the people in Trawies now. They are plundering houses and ravishing women, but for a dying woman they do nothing.”

“For a dying woman!” said Wahnfred, starting from his seat. “What do you mean?”

For a moment the fire guardian was at a loss how to answer.

“What do you mean, Gallo? A dying woman?”

“You see, do you not, that my wife is dying and that we have no one to help us?”

“You are keeping something from me, Gallo, and I will know this moment the exact condition of my wife!”

“You can imagine that she is not very happy, Wahnfred; that this terrible trouble must necessarily affect a delicate woman; that would not surprise you?”

“She is ill!” cried Wahnfred; “you know more than you will tell. Gallo, do not deceive me! I will go to her now, if it costs me my life! Only I must know first how I am to find her.”

“We should be prepared for everything in this world,” answered Gallo.

“She is dead!” cried Wahnfred.

“What are you saying, carpenter? Nothing of the kind has yet occurred. But as I do not wish to take the responsibility of keeping it from you longer: if you would see her once more, then you certainly cannot wait until the bailiffs are gone.”

“I will go to her now,” said Wahnfred with decision. “Nothing shall prevent me. And if necessary, I will force my way with my knife to my sick wife.”

“We will try something else. Bart and I have talked it all over. We will carry a bale of straw into the house.”

“Why is it possible all at once to do that which you would never consent to do before?” cried Wahnfred excitedly. “Gallo, had you kept it from me too long, I could never have forgiven you!”

They started immediately and ascended the mountain, Wahnfred far in advance of the aged man. He had wished to carry the first violet to his wife, and now he trod upon the young flowers; but his step was so light and fleet that he scarcely

injured these blue eyes of the reawakening earth. He flew rather than walked, and in vain the fire guardian called after him not to run blindly into danger. Upon the summit they were met by Bart.

“ Ah, you have come already, carpenter!” he cried.

“ Bart,” said Wahnfred, seizing him by the hand and trying to urge him forward, “ Bart, we have no time to lose. You have taken my wife into your house and for her sake have endured the presence of the bailiffs. You have been a good friend to us, so you will tell me honestly how I shall find her.”

“ She is still alive,” answered Bart, “ and yonder in the thicket the bale of straw is ready for you.”

It was made out of the longest corn-stalks of the preceding summer. Wahnfred opened it and crawled inside, the men tying it together over him. Then, placing it upon two carrying-poles, they bore it towards the house in the Tärn.

“ It is fortunate,” said Bart, “ that the spies went yesterday to a shooting-match and have not yet returned, with the exception of one, who sits before the door carving for his amusement all sorts of figures on the wall. To deceive him, I have already had a few bales of straw carried in this morning. He thrust his spear into the first and demanded of us what we were carrying. Then I asked him if he did not know a bale of straw when he saw it. If not, he might go to work and thrash it out himself, bring it into the house, and pile it up in the loft. Of course he had no idea of working, so he settled

back on his bench, asking no questions when the second bale was brought in."

"Does she know that I am coming?" asked Wahnfred.

"Be quiet, carpenter, we are close to the house."

They carried their burden across the grass, through the little yard, where the spring was splashing into the trough; they carried it slowly, unconcernedly towards the door.

The bailiff was lounging on his bench, with a dish of cream before him, to which he had helped himself in the pantry. He was staring angrily at the remainder of the delicious viand, for he wished to eat more of it, yet his appetite was satisfied. When he saw the men approaching with the bale of straw, his duty all at once occurred to him.

"Is that straw again?" he demanded crossly.

"Yes, soldier," answered Bart. "You must enjoy standing sentinel over straw!"

"Is that *all* straw?" cried the bailiff, striking the bale with his spear.

Instead of feeling alarm, Bart lost his temper.

"Why are you always suspecting my straw?" he cried.

"Put it down!" snarled the soldier.

"Oh, can't you understand a joke?" said the fire guardian appeasingly.

Notwithstanding, the bailiff tore the bundle from the poles and broke it open. The men sought to force him back, but he threatened with his gun, at the same time stirring up the straw. As it fell apart, Wahnfred sprang out, and seizing the frightened,

reeling soldier by the throat, exclaimed: "So this is how I have to fight my way to my dying wife!" And half strangling the man he flung him against the wall.

He rushed into the house and entered the inner room. This was dimly lighted, the little windows being thickly covered. Upon the table burned a red taper. Mistress Bart, forgetting the curse, had brought out the crucifix which she had saved from the plunderers. This old wooden cross had stood by the deathbeds of many members of her own family, and it should now comfort her dear companion, who for hours had been struggling with death.

"Oh, my merciful Lord Jesus Christ," Mistress Bart had prayed before the crucifix, "we are Thine, we will never leave Thee. Wicked men would tear us from Thee, but we embrace Thy head with its crown of thorns, we flee to Thy sacred wounds! Oh, loosen Thine arm from the cross and hold us fast, us poor sinners, for whom Thou hast died! Do not desert us when man casts us out! Stand by us when the evil one would destroy us! Help us in life, help us in death, help us, my Jesus!"

In the dark corner of the room by the table two little white hands were uplifted in prayer. They belonged to Erlefried, who was kneeling there, exhausted from his night watches and weeping, and who knew nothing else to do for his mother than to pray before the image of the Saviour.

Close by on a low bed lay the sick woman, her face white as wax bleached by the sun. That

peculiar radiance which rests like a reflection of youth upon the countenance of the dying, played about her head. Her eyes were open and she seemed to be looking towards the door. She had begged him not to come and yet she hoped that he would come.

She did not hear the noise without, but as the door now opened, her face brightened even before she saw him. Wahnfred stopped, terrified. The awfulness of death calmed his excited mood. Erlefried advanced shyly and anxiously, as though uncertain whether it were his father or a stranger. Wahnfred laid his hand upon the boy's head and gazed at his wife. He was rooted to the spot, as if here also a sentinel were standing; but this one could not be flung aside like the other.

His wife, looking up at him with unspeakable sorrow, tried to smile. At last she moved her lips: "Wahnfred, Wahnfred! take thy hand off the boy, I implore thee!"

Her words were like a knife through his heart; quickly he withdrew his hand; he felt as if he must flee. She made a slight movement, motioning to him to stay and to lay his hand in hers.

"I woke thee, my Wahnfred, that night when the clock struck one. Thou hast been a long time away from me."

"Never," he replied, his voice choking with sobs, "never will I leave thee again!"

"If only I need not leave thee so soon!" she said. "I would that I might stay with thee, for thou hast been most unhappy."

He fell on his knees beside her bed and pressing

his face against her hand wept aloud. Her eyes rested earnestly and lovingly upon him and a tear trembled under her lashes.

“ I am thankful, Wahnfred, that thou canst weep,” she said softly; “ these tears are precious pearls which I shall carry with me into eternity. They will light the dark way and I shall find my God.”

“ Take me with thee, dearest wife, take me with thee!”

“ No, Wahnfred, thou must stay a while longer on the earth and atone for what thou hast done. And thou must not despair! Do not mind the curse of the Church, but the curse from thine own hand thou must remove! I know thou didst take the oath to do the deed, and thy intentions were not evil. Thou art not a wicked man, my Wahnfred, and wilt yet redeem thyself. Only do not forget to say to our Erlefried: Sin will always be sin; even though it be done that good may come, it will always be sin!”

“ I promise thee, my wife, I promise thee as many times as I have hairs on my head, that I will do penance for everything and make reparation as far as I am able. By this marriage ring, Marie, I pledge my faith to thee once more!”

“ Think of our child ; besides that I ask nothing. Do not mourn for me. Thou hast always been a loving husband and my life with thee has been a paradise. When thou hast finished thy task and canst lay thyself to rest, then I will come to thee and together we will go to our Lord. Dost thou hear the sweet singing ? ”

She listēnēd; he tried to listen also, but heard only the gnawing of a wood-beetle in the wall.

“That means the death hour!” whispered Mistress Bart to her husband, who was standing by the door.

“How wonderfully they sing!” murmured the invalid. “It is the angels’ choir. The room is so dark. Will it never be day? I should so like to see the beloved light once more!”

They removed the covering from the windows, letting in a flood of sunlight. She gazed at it fixedly as though wondering if that were the light she had meant. Finally her lids drooped and she slept. Wahnfred knelt by her side, holding his boy pressed close to him, his eyes riveted upon the slumberer.

The last gleam of sunlight had long since vanished; an oil lamp had been placed in the room, its soft light flickering on the wall. The sick woman was still asleep, Wahnfred sitting by her side, watching.

After midnight she suddenly started. “Wake up! Wake up!” she cried in a strong, clear voice. “It has struck one!”

“Art thou better, Marie?” asked Wahnfred softly, bending his face over hers. “Thou hast slept well.”

Her eyes were open, but he did not know whether she saw him. Her breathing, at first scarcely audible, quickened, then almost ceased. Mistress Bart, who had not left the bedside, lighted with trembling hands the red taper and murmured a prayer.

Wahnfred sprang to his feet, crying: "What is it? Erlefried! Erlefried!"

"Let him sleep," said the woman. And then, turning towards the bed: "Beloved sister, go with God! Pray for us in heaven!—Close her eyes, Wahnfred! It is all over!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE house in the Tärn was once more free. The sentinel, at first stunned by his fall, lay for a while senseless. Bart disarmed him and concealed the weapons; he then examined the carving on the wall, which the soldier had just finished. It was of a deer running, pursued by dogs and hunters. In the Tärn forest still stands a house on the walls of which may be seen the remnants of an old carving, said to be the same made by the sentinel while on the watch for the outcast, Wahnfred.

When the soldier recovered consciousness and became aware that he was without his weapons, he slunk away and disappeared.

Upon a patch of green meadow at the edge of the forest, almost on the very spot where in the winter Erlefried had made the snow-image of his father, stood Bart and Wahnfred, measuring a little place for a grave. Dew-drops sparkled on the grass, the birds were holding high carnival in the trees, some twittering and chirping, others straining their little throats in a loud, jubilant song. In the valleys the morning mists were merging into a soft, gauze-like veil, which floated over mountains and trees, then rose and melted in the blue ether. Up here on the

heights, the sun already shone brightly from a cloudless sky. A cool breath, laden with spicy perfumes from the budding forest, with its young plants and flowers, was wafted through the sunlit trees and across the meadow.

As Bart was about to thrust his spade into the ground, Wahnfred laid his hand upon the tool, saying: "Let us save the turf and take it up carefully, that we may lay it down again for a cover. It will soon be green once more, and strangers must not know where she lies."

"That can be done very easily," answered Bart, cutting out a square of turf. Then Wahnfred also took a spade and commenced to dig. The root of a pine standing near by was stretched directly across the grave.

"We must chop that away," said Bart.

"I would rather leave it as it is and dig around and under it," replied the carpenter. "The forest shall protect her with its arm."

They then proceeded with their work, neither speaking a word. Not until they stood shoulder-deep in the grave and the drops of sweat covered Bart's forehead, did he stop for a moment, resting his elbows upon the handle of his spade, to watch Wahnfred digging.

"Take your time," he said; "we shall finish early enough."

"The world shall have her no longer," muttered Wahnfred.

"You must not torment yourself, carpenter! In my house she suffered no harm and I loved her like

a sister. And you too, Wahnfred, you know where your home is, yours and Erlefried's. So long as I have a home, you belong to us. I think you will be safer now. Let come what may to Trawies, we three, you, the fire guardian, and I, will stand together. And with such spring weather as we have to-day, one would think that all must come right again."

"It will," answered the carpenter, still digging. And he would have kept on until he reached the heart of creation, had not a clear voice, crying, "Father!" recalled him to himself.

Above in the bright sunlight stood Erlefried. At first he gazed with horror into the dark depths below him, then he repeated his message: Mistress Bart had sent word that Wahnfred should think of himself and come to dinner. "The others have already eaten," said the boy, "but I am waiting for thee."

So the man emerged from the grave and taking Erlefried's hand they entered the house.

At the burial-service on the following day no one was present besides the few members of the family and the fire guardian, who had brought with him in a lantern a light from the ancestral fire, which, as messenger from the olden days, should accompany the dead woman to the grave. She lay upon a bier, dressed in a long white robe, for which Mistress Bart had contributed her finest linen. The hands were not folded across her breast, but lying naturally at her sides, for she no longer prayed—she rested.

No physician had given a certificate of death; Bart had felt of her cold, stiff hand and said: "She will never wake again." They had no priest to pronounce a blessing; the fire guardian placed a cross of evergreen upon her brow, saying: "'Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord,' for they are freed from sin. We shall follow thee, dear sister, when we have discharged our duty on earth; then shall we enter our eternal rest."

They laid the body into the coffin, which was rough and crude and evidently not made by the carpenter.

Wahnfred once more gently stroked the right hand of his wife, saying: "Sleep sweetly! Sleep sweetly! I will not say good-bye."

And then Bart closed the lid and nailed it down. Hearing the noise, Erlefried hastened up with some violets in his hand to lay upon his mother's breast.

"It is too late, child," said Bart, and his wife added: "Besides, it is better not to place offerings in a coffin, for the saying is, that one must mourn until they have decayed."

"Let us carry her now to her resting-place," said the fire guardian, taking up the poles. "We have loved her, but God has loved her more and He has taken her to Himself. Help me, Bart!"

They bore the burden out of the house and across the meadow, Mistress Bart carrying the light from the fire, which had been so sacredly preserved and handed down by their ancestors.

As they approached the grave, the bearers started back in alarm. A pair of little ashen-grey birds

fluttered out and away into the bushes; they were two young snow-buntings that had been seeking for insects. No grave is so deep that life cannot enter it!

They lowered the coffin as quickly as possible, throwing in earth with their hands and shovels until the last bit of white was covered. After they had replaced the sod, they brushed away the loose dirt with twigs, leaving scarcely a trace of the newly made grave.

Then Wahnfred, turning towards the others, said: "Now I want to thank you; you, Bart-from-Tärn, for the friendship shown my wife under your roof and at your table; and you, Mistress Bart, for the love and tenderness with which you have nursed and comforted her; and you, other inmates of the house, I thank for all that you have done for her. I thank you, Gallo, for bringing up the fire and for helping me to bury her. And now," he said, seizing Bart by the hand, "I will ask you to keep my boy and to be a friend and father to him when I am not here. I am going down to Trawies!"

After shaking hands with them all, he pressed his boy to his heart and, turning away from the grave, walked rapidly towards the valley.

The people dispersed, the fire guardian to his home, the others into the house, which now seemed large and empty.

Only one person remained upon the grave—Erlefried. He stood alone, still holding in his hand the little bouquet of violets intended for his mother. Why had he not been allowed to lay it upon her

breast? For would he not mourn much longer than it would take them to wither and die? And who had asked him whether he wished to live on after he had ceased to mourn for his dead mother?

Such were the boy's thoughts; he felt something like resentment towards Bart and his wife and he did not wish to re-enter the house. He could hardly realise that his mother lay beneath him, buried in the moist earth. As he stood thus, delicate and slender in physique, his thick curls throwing a shadow over his face, increasing its seriousness, he was no longer a child. The light agility of the boy was gone and new presentiments and thoughts, far beyond his age, were imprinted upon his brow.

This one winter had developed him more than years filled with the ordinary events of a happy boyhood. Hard experiences age a man and develop a boy quickly. Our bodies move in that aimless, wild freedom which we call the exuberance of childhood only so long as they are not held in restraint by the brain. When this, by time, training, or experience, is strong enough to control the body, then manhood begins. Erlefried pondered and brooded, then listened to the singing of the birds.

"You are happy," he thought. "Ah, could I only know what you are saying to one another! My mother once told me that in order to understand the song of birds, one must touch the flesh of a certain dragon, but she also said that it was a monster, devouring everyone who crossed its path."

Stop, my boy! That dragon, by which the German myth has symbolised earthly passion, has not

yet touched thee! The birds in the branches are perhaps angels, telling each other how they have come down from heaven, where to-day a great festival is being held. For a sufferer, a faithful, loving wife and mother, robed in snowy white, has arrived there. The flower-bells have been ringing in the garden of paradise, and the archangel is awaiting the newcomer at the golden gates, to lead her, accompanied by virgins and martyrs, to Mary, the Queen of Heaven, who embraces her, and, placing a crown of roses upon her head, gives her the choicest seat at her feet.

This was the song that the birds sang to little Erlefried as he stood musing upon his mother's grave. It was a deer that finally aroused him from his dreams. The creature was standing among the trees, looking at the boy, who was now a child again.

"Why dost thou not run away?" cried Erlefried, almost threateningly. "Dost thou not realise that I am a man, who might shoot thee?"

The animal, with head erect, trotted a few paces nearer; how defiantly he shook his antlers at the boy!

"Go," said the lad, "I will not harm thee! Let us be good friends to-day! For see, my mother has just died!"

The deer turned suddenly and darted away through the crackling underbrush, startled by the sound of someone approaching.

Sela, the beautiful little maid, now came stealing up. She was, however, no longer very small, she was only beautiful, and by this Erlefried recognised her.

“ Erlefried!” she called. He heard her voice, he looked at her, but knew not how to reply.

“ Erlefried,” repeated the girl, and she stood close beside him, “ thou didst tell me once that whenever I wanted thee, I should call thee; and I want thee now!”

“ Shall I carry thee over the stream? Well, here I am,” said Erlefried, looking into Sela’s fresh young face.

“ I only want to see thee, Erlefried, then I will go away again. Yes, I will go now.”

“ Dost thou like violets?” he asked, holding the little bouquet towards her.

Taking it in her hand she gazed into his face, wondering how she might best distract and cheer him on this day, when he had just buried his mother.

“ Hast thou not been riding a deer?” she asked.

“ I, riding a deer!” said Erlefried, in surprise.

“ Yes,” continued Sela; “ I saw thee quite distinctly—I saw thee climb upon the back of a deer which was lying asleep in the forest. It sprang to its feet and darted away with thee, up the rocks of the Trasank and over the precipice to the Wildwiese and then down into the gorge, where the Trinity was drowned in the Trach. I was terribly frightened—and then, all of a sudden, I was awake!”

She told her story with great vivacity.

“ Thou hast been dreaming about me, Sela?”

“ Yes, last night. And I could do nothing until I had seen thee and assured myself that thou wert safe and that it was not true. Yes, I should like the

violets, and take care, Erlefried, and do not try to ride a deer!"

"Sela!" he said.

"But what a deep voice thou hast now!"

"Sela, I should like to know if thy father could make use of such a one in his house?"

"What kind of a one?"

"I can chop wood, Sela."

"That's good."

"I can carry loads and cut up kindling. And I can also feed and water the cows, and milk them too. I could easily learn to fell trees. And for a long time I have known how to plane boards. If there are herbs and roots to collect, I can do that. Thy father should just try me!"

"My father said that thou wouldst stay with Bart."

"But I have n't said that I would. I will not stay with Bart, and since my mother is dead I can go where I please!"

The girl, noticing how angry he was growing, asked what Bart had done to offend him.

"I am no child!" muttered Erlefried, his voice almost failing him; "they refused to let me take a last look at my mother."

"Be thankful that thou hast not taken the last look," replied the girl; "my father told us how thou hast mourned over that. So I came up as quickly as I could. But thou art angry now, and I will go back again at once."

"Sela, stay with me!"

"Thou must not be vexed at what I am going to say,

Erlefried, but it is not right what thou wouldst do. After Bart has been so good to thy mother, wouldst thou be an ungrateful lad, and go away into the wild forest? That would be like thy ride on the deer!"

"It is easy for thee to talk," replied Erlefried, hesitatingly; "thou hast thyself."

"Thou also," laughed the girl.

"But that does not make me happy. Now that my mother is dead, I wish I could be with thee!"

"Thou canst come down often to see me and I will come to thee. It is much more cheerful up here than down in the gorge. Thou must be a good lad, and thankful. Wilt thou?"

"For thy sake I will stay with Bart," said the boy; "but in return for that thou must dream of me every night!"

"Where have they buried thy mother?" asked Sela

"Here," he said softly.

"Where?"

"Here, where we are standing. She lies here."

Startled at his reply, the girl stepped back a few paces, and folding her hands she gazed upon the ground.

She was praying. As Erlefried became aware of this he, too, folded his hands. Then it occurred to him that one should always say a prayer upon graves. And so they stood for a while motionless as the trees. A gay butterfly was circling over the heads of the two children standing on the grave, on the unconsecrated ground, surrounded by ruin—but they were young and longed to be happy.

CHAPTER IX

WAHNFRED had gone over the mountains, to the left of which lies the heathland, and to the right the valleys of Trawies and of the Tra-sank. His intention was to stop at Freiwild's house to see if the new conditions were as little in evidence there as in Bart's home, where industry and time-honoured customs continued as of old. But Freiwild's house was closed and no human being was to be seen in the vicinity. A cow was mooing in the stall, the only sign of life on the premises. As Wahnfred walked around the yard investigating, he thought he saw up in the gable a pair of legs disappearing through the window.

He stopped and listened, but discovered nothing further and heard only the mooing of the hungry cow.

As he turned to leave the place he noticed a strong, pungent odour coming from a wooded ravine and smoke rising from among the firs; it was the schnapps distillery of old Ursula, a sister of Freiwild, who had here a wretched little hut where she carried on a miserable business.

But now—from what Wahnfred saw—the business seemed to be anything but miserable. Under the

trees, over rudely constructed stoves of clay, stood a row of five kettles, from each one of which a bright stream trickled into a keg. Before one of these kegs Ursula was crouching, and, with the exception of the flushed face, she was almost the colour of clay herself in her half feminine, half masculine attire. She was holding her fingers under one of the streams testing the quality of the new brew. As Wahnfred spoke to her, she started back in fright, then asked what he wanted.

“ I only wish to watch you, Ursula.”

“ You know me ? You, too, seem—I ’m sure I ’ve often seen you, but I can’t quite place you this moment.”

“ The carpenter from the Gestade,” he said.

Straightening herself, she stared at him in astonishment, then cried: “ He! You Wahnfred, the carpenter! Well, I never should have known you.”

He muttered a few inarticulate words.

“ Yes, the carpenter,” she continued; “ he is nothing special, to be sure. But that you should be able to kill priests like that! Yes, we know all about it. Perhaps you are lying to me and are someone else after all!”

“ I am amazed, Ursula, that your distillery has grown so large.”

“ Ha!” said the old woman with a grin, disclosing her broad, thick tongue between her toothless jaws, “ I wonder if you are really Wahnfred! By my soul, I had pictured this man as quite different! But if you are he, I have you to thank that my

business is so flourishing. Since the boundaries have been enclosed and no wine comes into Trawies, the people all drink schnapps. It 's much more sensible. You just wait a moment," and she hastened into the hut, returning with an earthenware pitcher and a mug; filling the latter she said: " You must try it, carpenter. It 's my very best. To think that I have n't even a bench to sit down on! I should like, carpenter, to have you make me a few benches and tables to put here on the grass. People are coming all the time and it looks very shabby to oblige them to sit around on the ground."

" What kind of people come ? "

" Stupid question! A crowd comes, men and women, who are wandering about in the woods. I give them their little drop and trouble myself no further about them. They ought to be happy—for now they can live as they please."

" Your brother Freiwild," asked Wahnfred, " is he not going to work his farm this year ? "

" Why do you ask ? "

" Because I saw no one in his fields, and his house is closed."

" I 've no doubt of that. The people have all lost their heads. No one plants the fields, for nothing will thrive now in Trawies soil, they say—and they 're probably right. Not even a blade of grass will grow, and if one happens to spring up, it withers the next day. So they would be fools to waste their last corn in the earth."

" But what do the people do ? " asked Wahnfred excitedly,

“ Oh, don't you worry that they have n't enough to keep themselves busy. If it was n't for my little warm drink here, then you might ask. Are you never taken that way ? ”

“ What way ? ”

“ Are you not sometimes seized with the horrors at the thought that we are damned for time and eternity ? See here, when that comes over you, don't you drink ? ”

“ God forbid ! ”

“ God ! ” grinned the old woman, “ the Trinity which they drowned in the Trach ? Why, that 's the reason we have to drown our poor souls in schnapps. Drink, carpenter, and I will fill the jug again. ”

“ Be off with your stuff ! ” said Wahnfred, throwing the jug down at her feet. “ Do you know how the brewers of poison were punished in the Old Testament ? ”

“ Oh, oh ! ” replied Ursula spitefully ; “ because you can never be a Christian again, you are going to try being a Jew ! ”

“ 'T would be a thousand times better than living on like godless brutes. The strong God of the Jews with His rod, Ursula, would be just the one for us ! ”

The shambling, tattered figure of Roderich, the tramp, now appeared walking along the cliff. While still at some distance, he began calling for brandy with his hoarse voice. On seeing Wahnfred, he clapped his hands and rushed towards him, screaming : “ The carpenter ! The saviour ! Oh, you hero, come to my arms ! ” and he tried to embrace him, but Wahnfred pushed him back.

“ You see what you can do with him, Roder; he ’s as sour as vinegar,” said the malicious Ursula to the tramp.

“ With you, I can well believe,” he replied; “ but in the inn at Trawies, there he ’ll wear another face, I ’m sure of that. Wahnfred! Conqueror! Dragon destroyer! Say, then, in what hollow oak-tree have you been lying buried through the winter, that we have searched for you everywhere in vain ? ”

“ Who has searched for me ? ”

“ We, the citizens of Trawies,” said the tramp, straightening himself in his rags as erect as his stunted body would allow. “ And do you know, too, carpenter, that I shall get my drinks free to-night ? The first one who finds you is to be treated by the rest. The Council agreed to that on Candlemas Day.”

“ I should like to know what Council has anything to decide concerning me ! ” remarked Wahnfred.

“ You ’ll soon find out, hero ! Only come with me. To-day you get no money from me, old woman ; to-day I ’m going somewhere else ! Come, carpenter, come along and don’t wait for a golden chariot to carry you ! Everybody is equal now in the Kingdom of Trawies, and you must see, brother, how merry we ’ve all grown since last Advent. If you want another drink, then drink, if not, come ! ”

Wahnfred was about to refuse to accompany the man, but he reflected a little. His road also led to Trawies, and by going with this talkative tramp he might learn much on the way concerning the new

conditions in his native place. So the two men walked on together, but Wahnfred discovered nothing further than that the tramp was in a jovial mood.

“ Now, my brother,” said the man, laying his arm over the shoulder of the carpenter, “ now the time has come when no one has any hardships to endure. One winter has already gone, and in the summer it will be merrier yet. The only thing I dread is that the watch may be removed from the boundaries; if that should happen, then all sorts of trouble would come upon Trawies. You must n’t think, carpenter, that everything goes smoothly. There are many stupid people among us. For instance, Mistress Sandhok insists on doing penance so that the church will be opened again; the herb doctor and the blacksmith, Paul, are saying their prayers to have the ban removed. Those are people who do not know when they are well off. Wahnfred, we shall have all we can do to keep on our feet. There are also a few of the old peasants who will have nothing to do with the new parish. But now that we have you, brother, now things will go straight.”

As they entered Trawies, the tramp gripped his companion’s arm more firmly; he was only sorry that it was growing dark and that the people could not see whom he had with him to-day. They might have conjectured that Roderich was also concerned in the occurrence of last Advent, he seemed on such intimate terms with the carpenter.

Wahnfred cast one quick glance towards the church gleaming through the darkness from the hill. The windows of the tavern, which they were

now approaching, were brightly lighted. The room was filled with boisterous drinkers. The tramp pushed open the door with his foot, drawing his companion in after him.

“ See, people, only see, whom I am bringing in ! ” he cried.

“ Wahnfred ! ” they screamed, greeting the newcomer joyfully. “ Our saviour and benefactor, where have you been so long, leaving us all alone ? Carpenter ! Blessed redeemer of Trawies ! But why are you looking at us in that strange way ? ”

They slapped him on the shoulders in welcome, they crowded forward to shake him by the hand. In the dim candle-light Wahnfred scarcely recognised one of the grinning faces. They were a wild, motley crowd of rough, bearded fellows, who all looked as though they had, like himself, just come down from the wilderness. Charcoal-burners, woodcutters, peasants, poachers, miners, herb-gatherers, had left their places of work, taken whatever they could lay their hands on, and because they were numerically the stronger, had assumed the authority and were now the freemen and citizens of Trawies. Pedlars and the rabble from the highways were among them, having been urged to join the so-called parish. Men from distant forests, whom one would not like to meet on lonely paths, were also here. They were welcomed into the new society, whose chief objects were that its members should be of one mind, and that its strength should be increased as rapidly as possible. Of the same mind were also those who had escaped from prison or the

gallows and had fled to Trawies; thus the outlawed village had now become a refuge for criminals.

The band went from house to house, from hut to hut, and those who did not join it were in danger of losing their possessions and their lives. They held their court in the tavern; here they took counsel together, but these assemblies often ended in quarrels, or more often in carousals. As long as they had money, which flew from hand to hand, business was conducted with fair regularity. "It is forbidden to take from one another by force," was a law in the new "parish."

But when the tavern-keeper and the pedlar refused to accept money, being unable to redeem the coins, a rebellion threatened, and it was finally agreed to take all the provisions from the houses of Trawies and to divide them among the people. Old Ursula was the only person who still took money, as she was not yet aware that the coins were worthless, for, instead of spending them, she hid them in an old jug which she buried in the ground. And so it came about that in Trawies cash was paid only for schnapps, and that was all that could be bought with it.

This was the state in which Wahnfred found them as he entered the tavern. There were also women present, one or more between every two men, with blazing cheeks and many with blazing eyes. They stared boldly at the handsome, slender man with the pale face. With one accord they all rose to their feet, offering him brandy, and drinking with shouts of joy to the liberator of Trawies.

“ Now you belong to us ! ” they cried ; “ now you must stay with us ! We need just such a man as you. Why are you as pale as the stone image of a saint ? You are not afraid that we will give you up ? ”

“ See, here is your axe from the sacristy, which we are sacredly preserving. It suits us far better than the crucifix ! ”

Wahnfred shuddered with horror at sight of the rusty implement, at the hard steel from which had sprung the spark that burned like hell fire in his own soul, and was growing in strength and becoming a disastrous conflagration in the minds of the people. Still filled with the sorrow of the morning at the grave, he could scarcely utter a word. He would have preferred, after what he had seen and heard to-day, to flee as far as his feet would carry him. But the thought of his oath at the deathbed of his wife and his resolve to conquer or fall with Trawies restrained him. So turning to the people, he said : “ Friends, if you will trust me, our union may yet be profitable. ”

Loud cheers broke forth and the carpenter was dragged to the foremost table. “ Drink brandy, brother, ” said one of the company ; “ it will make a new man of you, mark my words ! ”

The outer door was suddenly opened and Mistress Freiwild entered in great excitement and inquired for her husband. He was standing by a table near the stove, and on seeing his wife he calmly asked her if she had come for another beating like the last one.

Covering her face with her hand to ward off the

blow, she answered timidly: "No, no, stay and drink as long as thou wilt; I only came to tell thee that we have been robbed this afternoon. The rascals have stolen all the lard and meat and linen; the big chest has been broken open and thy new boots are gone!"

Freiwild sprang upon the table, crying: "I've been robbed, Council of Trawies, I've been robbed!"

"The thief must have crawled in through the upper window," continued the woman; "there are scratches from his boot-nails on the wall."

"I've been robbed!" screamed Freiwild.

"There must be a hellish pack of fiends wandering about," remarked Roderich, the tramp, turning towards Wahnfred; "we are constantly hearing of thefts and robberies."

"Is it not possible that you may have seen the thief to-day?" asked Wahnfred.

"Why? What do you mean by that?" answered Roderich, anxiously.

"Because you were just coming from Freiwild's house when we met at the distillery."

One of the men then approached Freiwild, saying: "Do you mean to say that you had meat and lard? Would n't you have told us next week, when we came to collect provisions, that there was nothing in your house and that you were going hungry yourselves? See here, you rascal, you deserve a beating, for you are deceiving the parish!"

"Parish!" said Freiwild in a loud whisper to the speaker. "You are afraid you won't get your full

share yourself! You give only the lean portions to the parish. Shall I tell where you conceal the fat pieces?"

"Don't tell, we'll divide," answered the man in a low voice.

"We've already divided. In the Ross cave, where you had hidden your booty, I found the lard and meat which has just been stolen from me."

A little man now advanced, the wood-cutter Stom, from the Trasank valley. No one could see him as he pushed his way through the crowd, but his high, screeching voice was distinctly audible.

"I have something to say," he screamed.

"Silence! Stom has something to say," was cried on all sides.

The little man, having mounted a chair, now began: "People, if things go on in this way, our new parish will be ruined. It is bad enough to plunder each other, but it is still worse that this will soon have to cease because there will be nothing more to steal in Trawies. And it is useless to work, for no blessing will come with it; heaven is closed to us; we get nothing more from outside; even the creatures of the forest are clever enough not to cross the boundary now. Shall we consume ourselves?"

A murmur of discontent was heard.

"We'll soon dispose of you," jeered the tramp.

"You cross-eyed vagabond, you!" screamed the speaker, "making your rusty jokes when a man is trying to be serious. I'll dispose of you sooner! You're a good-for-nothing parasite, if not something worse!"

The tramp was seized and dragged to the door, and all the time he was wailing: "Is this the thanks I get for bringing you the carpenter?" It may have been a piece of good fortune for the man, for Wahnfred was on the point of asking him what he was doing up at Freiwild's house this afternoon and of examining his boots, to see if they could have left scratches on the wall or in any way resembled the pair he had seen disappearing through the window.

The wood-cutter Stom now continued his discourse: "Since neither work nor self-destruction will help matters, I propose the following: If we do not wish to perish we must combine until we are a strong band, and then go boldly forth to the houses of the nobility and to the farms outside and help ourselves to what we want wherever we find it."

"A band of robbers!" exclaimed Wahnfred, bending forward as if he had misunderstood.

"I have said nothing about a band of robbers," replied the speaker. "When Hungarians and Turks invade a land, burning houses and castles, they are called by another name. When the Swedes come and plunder even the imperial courts, and the Bishop of Salzburg celebrates Ash Wednesday throughout the year,—for he is always burning fortresses and villages,—who calls them a band of robbers? Trawies has now become independent; Trawies has men capable of bearing arms. And if the outsiders should declare war against us, should we cowardly creep out of sight, like a fox in his hole? Are there no lions in the wilderness? And have we not a lion's head carved on our old church

door? Now we shall learn the meaning of the lion in Trawies. Comrades, let us start a campaign!"

"A campaign! A war! Down with the nobility!" In wild confusion the words were shouted; some of the people seized their clubs and knives as though about to start at that very hour. The women sprang to their feet, declaring with shrill voices that they would not be left at home, but would join the band with scythes, pitchforks, and axes, and their fingers twitched with the desire to begin. Stom beamed and smiled with pleasure as he saw the effect of his words.

"This is all very well," he said with a smirk, "but first we must choose a leader. He need not be a giant in body, but he must have a clear brain and unbounded energy; he must be as keen as the devil and be intimidated by nothing, plunging ahead like a roaring lion—I should just like to show him how!"

The people at once proceeded to elect their leader. And even the more thoughtful ones decided that, whether or not the expedition should take place, it would be necessary to have some one at their head. His size and strength were of comparatively little importance, also his ability to speak in public, but he must not be a house-owner; he must be one of the foot-loose citizens, that he might not be tempted to return to old, worn-out customs, which would bring with them the old evil. He must have a good head and a sure hand, both with implements of work and of war, and in some way he must have proved that the parish was more to him

than all else in the world, even than himself. There was but one man present of whom that could be said, who had the confidence of all and who should consider it a duty as well as an honour to accept the position.

Little Stom bowed with profusion and said that he was much gratified at the great honour conferred upon him, and that he would consider it his first duty to serve the parish.

It was again announced that there was but *one* present who could be proposed for election, and he was the brave man who had liberated the parish of Trawies from slavery—Wahnfred, the carpenter.

The tongues were now loosened and from all sides was heard: "Wahnfred shall be our chief, our general, our leader, and king!" The women screamed the loudest and each one cried with two voices, one as citizen, one as woman.

In the meantime Wahnfred was struggling to subdue his ever-rising indignation; his soul was filled with anger and scorn. Could this be Trawies? He had come with the hope of quieting these people, who had been cast out from Church and State, and of leading them to a better way of life. And now was he to be chief of a band of rough, degenerate men and women? On the other hand, it was clear to him that only thus could he gain an influence over this lawless mob. There being nothing to lose and everything to gain, Wahnfred's decision was quickly made. He rose, and, bracing himself with his hand against the table, said with a sad, but distinct, voice:

“ If I accept the position, I demand one thing! ”

“ Demand what you will! ” they cried.

“ I demand obedience! ”

“ He demands obedience! ” screamed the wood-cutter, Stom; “ you see, he who killed the tyrant would now himself be a tyrant! ”

“ There is one against me, ” said Wahnfred.

They beat Stom with their fists, declaring that the carpenter should be their leader.

“ There can be freedom only where there is law and order, ” said Wahnfred. “ This arm of mine is yours; it shall lead you. You are already acquainted with it. When it was uplifted with the axe it was intended for your good, and what it does further shall also be for your good! People of Trawies, obey me implicitly and I am yours! ”

“ Obedience, obedience to the chief of Trawies! ” re-echoed throughout the room; again the women’s voices were heard above the rest. The few discontented ones had left the tavern.

With a firm grasp, Wahnfred seized the axe and striking a heavy blow upon the table sent the blade deep into the wood. He then gazed sternly about him; the shouting merged into a murmur, which ended in silence. A feeling of ecstasy at yielding to a higher power filled these servile hearts.

CHAPTER X

A FEW weeks after Wahnfred had undertaken the leadership of the inhabitants of this forest region, and, by the exercise of all his craft and strength, had succeeded in so far restraining them that they temporarily ceased injuring one another, great excitement was caused among them by a strange spectacle in nature. Towards the end of May,—so relates the chronicle,—on a sultry, almost starless night, a fiery cross appeared in the eastern sky above the forest of the Tärn. It was of gigantic size, its colour a dull red, as though covered by a veil of mist. The arms seemed to rise and fall slowly; otherwise it remained ghost-like and motionless for nearly half an hour, when it gradually paled and disappeared, leaving the forest once more enveloped in darkness.

The timid souls, in their fright, crept into obscure corners, covering their faces to keep out the terrible sight. The brave ones stood and watched it. Not until it had passed were their tongues loosened to ask one another: “What was that?”

Even Wahnfred, who was now living, much against his will, in the fire guardian’s former home, when awakened from his slumbers, trembled inwardly

before the spectacle. And he said to the excited people assembled about his house: "Thank God the Lord, ye people of Trawies, that Heaven considers us worthy of a sign and a warning, for it proves that we are not lost. Cruel men have destroyed our cross; Heaven shows it to us again. On the day of judgment it is said that a cross shall appear in the sky. But that prophecy is not yet fulfilled, for the stars still shine. I believe that God has held this cross before our eyes as we hold the crucifix before the eyes of the dying. We have reason to tremble for our future. We are blasphemers, idlers, thieves, adulterers. Our sins have a thousand names. In this house once lived a good man, grown old in the love and service of Trawies,—you have cast him out!"

Wahnfred was interrupted by someone saying: "We did not cast him out because he had grown old in the love and service of Trawies, but because he would not accept the new customs."

"Tell me, what are the new customs?" cried Wahnfred. "You cannot? Then I will tell you: brute force and license! But I say to you, and I swear by the flaming cross in the sky, it must be otherwise!"

"Then change it if you can," answered one of the defiant men.

"Gallo Weissbucher, our chief, shall live once more in his house."

"He may, for all we care!"

"Consider for a moment," continued Wahnfred: "what if the fiery cross should fall from heaven upon Trawies!"

“ Let it, then! It can do no more than destroy us!”

A few of the people had followed Wahnfred's advice, but the majority could not be persuaded to plough and sow their fields this spring, their excuse being that nothing would grow in soil that had been cursed.

“ Do you call this land cursed ? ” cried Wahnfred, pointing to the luxuriant plant life, to the bright flowers on the meadows, to the blossoming fruit-trees, and to the new budding forest.

But who was there to sow ? The rabble had neither ground nor seed, and the landowners had been robbed so often that they foresaw who would garner their harvests. The few old settlers decided to let things take their course, thinking that when there was no more bread to be had in Trawies the rabble would disperse and disappear. Wahnfred owned a field near the ruins of his house. This he cultivated and planted with a variety of vegetables.

One day, soon after the appearance of the cross in the sky, Wahnfred sent word to the fire guardian that he might return to his house by the Trach. Gallo's reply was that since he had laid his wife to rest near the little hut in the Dürbach gorge he preferred to remain by her. While the messenger was on his way some miscreant slipped into the back of the house by the Trach and was on the point of setting it on fire when Wahnfred, who chanced to be in the vicinity, frightened the man away. This occurrence made Wahnfred more than ever realise how dangerous was the ground upon which he stood,

how despicable the "parish" that had chosen him for their chief. Daily he was beset by vagabonds and rapacious fellows, urging him to form a band of the able-bodied men of Trawies to set out on an expedition into the neighbouring country.

He did not refuse, not daring to risk his somewhat uncertain influence over the people, as well as their more than uncertain confidence in him. He put them off by saying that the present time was unfavourable on account of the military movement outside. Day and night he was trying to devise means to restore law and order. He took counsel of the outcast chief, the fire guardian, who was ill and broken and who replied: "There are three ways: either you fall prostrate before the cross and implore the Church to remove the interdict, or you wait for the soldiers to come in and destroy you, or—you destroy yourselves!"

This was Gallo Weissbucher's last word for Trawies. He withdrew into his poor little hut and remained alone with his fire and with his Sela.

"Yes," he once remarked, while watching his blooming child, "thou hast many years yet to live in this world. How will it deal with thee? The people here have gone mad. It is, alas! true, the brute instinct still remains in them. For a long time they held God's banner before their eyes, gazing up at it in ecstasy and following whithersoever it led. And now, all at once, their symbol is torn from their hands, hurled to the ground, trod upon, destroyed. One thing after another have they cast from them; they have desecrated their temple,

overthrown the laws, burned their own dwellings, living like beasts, yet with one human trait which beasts do not possess: sin. The greater the height from which they plunge into the sea, so much the deeper do they sink. But be of good courage, my child, the tide will cast them upon the shore again; once more will they find the sunlight; once more will they begin the struggle for existence, and in their distress and danger will make for themselves a new symbol, which after ages will again assume its former greatness and perfection. Happy he who, privileged to live at such a time, may, when dying, pronounce a blessing upon his race, instead of cursing himself and it, as I must do. I cannot bless thee, my Sela, but in guarding the ancestral fire I am keeping for thee the blessings of our forefathers and of all those who for love of coming generations have struggled and suffered."

The girl looked at the old man in astonishment; there was a strange ring in his voice, a strange brightness in his eyes.

Then withdrawing into himself, he murmured the wish that from the summit of the Birstling an avalanche might descend and bring with it a rock to bar the entrance to the Dürbach gorge. He feared the enemies who enclosed the boundaries with a ring of flame, but he was in still greater terror of the monster which had appeared in these mountains, fanning the fire of wildest passion in the hearts exposed to its mercy. How different was this fire from that of the household goddess, the sacred Vesta, which he had so faithfully defended

and guarded. This carefully preserved spark, which, hundreds, perhaps a thousand years ago, had sprung from the lightning that consumed the old oak-tree, beneath whose spreading branches the Germans had sacrificed to their gods,—this spark, which had come down from generation to generation, a silent legacy, filling their homes with a gentle warmth and a mellow light, but always ready to burst into a mighty conflagration, perchance to purify, perchance to destroy evil,—this spark, which had always been used at joyous festivals and to light the funeral torches at Trawies, and which now still glowed in the hut of the fire guardian—had become an outcast, a stranger, in the new kingdom.

Old Weissbucher sat by his hearth gazing into the embers. He no longer mourned the loss of his house, he felt at home here. This fire warmed his heart and filled it with contentment. Where on the earth is there anything more beautiful, more mysterious, more gentle, more powerful than fire? Fire brings life, and according to the Holy Writ, everything at last shall be destroyed by fire.

Sela piled logs and branches from fallen trees by the hearth, that they might always be in readiness for the nourishment of this living creature, so ancient, yet every moment born anew. By the crackling flames the old man would often fall asleep; but his slumber was restless, for he would frequently start up in fear that the fire might be extinguished.

Sela assured him many times every night that she would watch it.

“Thy spirit is willing,” said the fire guardian, “but thy flesh is weak. Thou art young; thou art filled with so much new life by the brightness of the day, that thou dost burn like this fire, and when night comes thine eyes close and thy limbs relax, thou art lifeless and knowest not what watching means. I cannot trust thee at night, Sela, my poor, beloved Sela!”

And when she slept and his own exhaustion threatened to overcome him, he would pile on the wood until at midnight the little hut in the gorge often presented a weird and brilliant sight.

Once, the fire guardian started suddenly from his slumbers, and discovered that the cross-beam of the house, which was utilised for hanging clothes, was on fire. The flames were spreading rapidly and threatened the roof, as if endeavouring to escape from their long imprisonment. But he wakened in time. Springing up, he cut the beam in twain with his axe, letting the pieces fall upon the damp clay floor, where the flames were soon extinguished.

“Whither wouldst thou go?” asked the old man, addressing the fire; “wouldst thou escape from Trawies altogether? Then would I go with thee; or wouldst thou wage war upon the ring of flame about our boundaries? Well and good! Fly away, envelop the forests of Tärn and of the Ritscher, and hurl thy fire-brands upon Trawies! Attack and melt the rocks of the Trasank and send thy stream of fire through the valley of the Trach! And do not spare my house, for we are murderers! Destroy this nest of criminals and remove from us the curse!

And when it is accomplished, then return to the peaceful homes of a better people and carry the blessings of our forefathers on into future ages!"

The awakened girl was terrified to see her father standing, with disordered locks and a wild look in his eyes, in the midst of smoke and glowing ashes, speaking in a loud tone words which she did not understand.

The voice of the child broke the spell. He took Sela in his arms and wept.

Thus they lived on, but the fire guardian declined from day to day. He would no longer remain out of doors; the sunlight hurt his eyes and he feared to leave his fire unguarded. So he sat constantly by his hearth, watching and thinking.

He realised that his end was near. He had sincerely repented of his sin, therefore death had no terrors for him; it was to him a dear, familiar thought, a gift of God, common to us all.

"After this world full of injustice, unrest, and suffering, death is a welcome messenger, a gentle liberator, reconciling us with life; for it atones for the injustice, removes the unrest, and ends the suffering. Death bestows what we ask of life; it is the final bond, which, freeing us, re-unites us with mankind; it is the portal where, with a glad smile, we meet all those who were for or against us in this world. After golden days of happiness, what more perfect ending could we ask than slumber? After the wretched existence of the poor, what can comfort and compensate more fully than rest? This earth is so rich in sunlight and joy, but it is sancti-

fied to us by death alone. Death makes life beautiful, and life justifies death. Nature resists as long as possible; it is her duty to live. But it is our duty to lay our bodies, with which we have enjoyed this world, thankfully and willingly to rest. Our forefathers have made a place for us, have bequeathed to us that for which they struggled on earth. And we perform the same service for our descendants. I am satisfied. If my God does not regret having lent me the light of life for this short period, I have no complaint to make."

Thus the fire guardian thought and brooded; then his glance would fall upon Sela, that young life which was expanding in the sunlight beside the old decaying stem, and was approaching the season for buds and flowers.

At times the girl would gaze earnestly at the old man's face, for it seemed so strange to her. He realised how thin and wasted he had grown. His heart was still warm and bright, although his eyes were sunken and dim, now seldom brightened by other light than that of the fire on his hearth, shining upon him with such friendly warmth.

His thoughts were ever with the fire. "By its glow, in days gone by, children have listened to the legends of Odin and lovers have exchanged the betrothal ring. Over it wedding feasts have been prepared; in its burning embers swords have been forged to fight the enemy; here gold has been refined and human hearts purified. Thou beloved fire come down from past ages, thou faithful friend, soon shall I require the last service of thee!"

One evening, as the full moon was shining into the gorge from above the tree-tops, the fire guardian was sitting before his hut, holding his child on his knees.

“My Sela,” said he, in a low voice, “thou lovest me?”

The child’s face grew serious and she bowed her head.

“And if I should tell thee something which thou must do, wouldst thou do it?”

“I will always do what thou wishest, father.”

“I love thee, my child, and shall love thee, even when I can no longer tell thee so. For see, my Sela, there will come a time when I shall sleep. When thy mother fell asleep thou wast in thy bed,—I would not wake thee. Do not go far away from the hut to-morrow or for the next few days. Stay with me and braid thy mats. When I am sitting on the bench asleep, listen to my breathing. If it is hard, like that of a tired man when he lays down his burden, then, child, light a candle at the ancestral fire and place it in my hand. Thou must not try to wake me, Sela; the hard breathing will soon be over, and I shall sleep quietly. Then take the candle from me, put it into the lantern which hangs over the bed, and carry it to Trawies, where Wahnfred lives. Give him the light and say: ‘The fire guardian delivers the fire into thy hands.’”

CHAPTER XI

FOR a certain period after Wahnfred's return to Trawies and while Gallo Weissbucher was preparing for his end, the thread of the narrative seems to be somewhat broken. A tradition is still extant of dark deeds and horrible crimes which occurred during the long years of the ban, and which were doubtless connected with Trawies. We may then suppose that the place was entirely outlawed as well as excommunicated, for how could the disorder and crime, the helplessness and despair of the people be otherwise explained?

In Oberkloster has been found an old record telling of a forest from which there is no return. The ruined, the outcast, the friendless, the homeless, the godless, go there and are never seen again. For there is a ring of fire about that forest; it is cut off and cursed. Anyone may enter, no one may come forth. One fable tells us within is paradise; another, within is hell.

This record undoubtedly refers to the outcast Trawies, where all kinds of vagabonds and lawless people collected, who for a short time lived a life of utter license, and then died a miserable death. The authorities, engaged with the military movement in

the country outside, seem to have entirely withdrawn from the region, only keeping watch over the boundary of the unfortunate district, without troubling themselves concerning that which took place within. Was it thought that the people of Trawies would consume themselves? Or was there hope that they would yet fall prostrate before the cross, perform solemn penances, and implore to be again received into the Church and the Empire? But both had been awaited in vain, and no one imagined that in the forests of the Trach a mighty force was gathering, whose terrible deeds were affecting all the neighbouring country and which no opposition could repel. Tales are told of robber bands from these forests which fell upon and destroyed farms and sometimes entire villages. Highway robberies and murders were of frequent occurrence in the neighbourhood of Trawies.

Soldiers forced their way into this nest, only to be repelled or massacred. At the Gestade, on the spot where Wahnfred's house once stood, a regular battle is said to have been fought. The rabble from Trawies were victorious; the dead warriors were carried down by the Trach to the "Five Pines," on the heathland, where they were washed up on the sand.

There were also quarrels, robberies, and deeds of violence among the people of Trawies themselves. But there was one of their number who, for a short period, succeeded in keeping a certain order; otherwise it would have been impossible for this outcast community to maintain itself.

This will suffice to give some idea of the horror. The narrator, who has endeavoured to explore, not the dusty chronicle alone, but also that unfailing source, the human heart, alludes to these terrible events in the shadows of the forest only as they are interwoven with the fortunes of that man who was the originator of the evil and who was now earnestly striving to restore in the hearts of these people their lost heaven and to lead the unhappy parish back to God.

Wahnfred had frequent opportunities to make himself useful, but the results were meagre. He was constantly doing for others. A hungry man never left his door unsatisfied; he divided with him his last crust, and for this Christian act of breaking bread—that greatest miracle of love—many thought that in the carpenter they recognised the Christ.

Wahnfred lived for a long time in the house of the outcast fire guardian by the Trach. He was called the captain, and the people cringed before him, fêted him, and showed him every honour—but they did as they pleased. His plan apparently to enter into their projects, that he might then guide them, had failed. They listened to his speeches, agreed to his arrangements, only to follow their own desires and passions the very next moment. They were the children of that age when people tampered with all kinds of sorceries and witchcraft, which in their case were for the most part unsuccessful. Many practised conjuring the devil, going about with the idea that he was their servant. They also sold themselves to the devil in exchange for worldly

goods. But with all this they felt the need of a king and high-priest. They swore to Wahnfred to give up their robberies, only to surprise him soon afterward with the richest treasures which they had captured on their last expedition.

They made him absolute master over life and death, but if he pronounced a verdict of punishment upon anyone, they laughed in his face. And he could only have carried out his sentences by possessing more strength than this defiant, jeering mob.

Wahnfred bore it patiently, always hoping for a change. He continued to be the central point in Trawies. The boundaries remained enclosed; the inhabitants themselves had now assumed the watch, and in their fanaticism and rage against those who had fled killed everyone who attempted to return.

At last Wahnfred made out a petition, an imploring cry to humanity for mercy, and carried it to the inhabitants of Trawies for their signatures.

“Are we such children that we should beg for the rod?” they answered. “We have no wish to return to slavery. They would only hang us, and as a last resort we can do that ourselves.”

“You have forgotten that *men* still live on this earth!” cried Wahnfred. “If they promise us mercy, they will grant it.”

“We do not want it. Their mercy would consist in sending us against the Turks.”

Then Wahnfred tried strategy. He went to the oldest, the natives of Trawies, in whom he hoped to find some love of justice and in whom lingered a desire for law and order, for the prayer-book and

the Bible ; there were but few such left, but to them he went, asking for their signatures.

“ Prepare your weapons,” said one, “ for you may have to write your names with blood.”

They made ready their weapons, rusty tools, utensils of the forest and field ; they concealed them in the corners of their houses and caves and under their beds, awaiting the revolt.

But Wahnfred went on collecting signatures and crosses,—only a few could write their names, the most made crosses,—and soon the large sheet was filled.

Wahnfred’s heart rejoiced. He was convinced that the removal of the ban could not be refused when it was seen that the Trawiesers were willing to repent and submit to the authorities. For himself, he longed for—the executioner’s block. His judge should pronounce no other sentence than the axe. But before he ascended the steps of the scaffold he would first make a pilgrimage to the pope and to the rulers of the land to implore their mercy for Trawies, which through his deed had been plunged into such misery.

Wahnfred was making arrangements to send this petition, which pledged the loyalty of Trawies for all time, by messengers to whom he had assured a safe escort across the boundary, when they suddenly turned upon him, asking what it was all about.

He read the petition to them once more and they laughed aloud. He showed them their signatures.

“ Where ?” they asked. He pointed to the numerous crosses.

“That means a graveyard!” they exclaimed, “and would take us there at once.”

“That scrap of writing will not give us consecrated ground again,” said the peasant Isidor; “throw it away, carpenter.”

“But your signature!”

“The cross has no value now in Trawies; you know that, carpenter.” And they tore the paper in pieces.

That night Wahnfred, gazing from his window at the stars, which formed a long path of light across the sky out towards the inhabited plains, thought of flight. He could go across the Ritscher forest and by the cliffs of the Trasank, thus escaping the region of Trawies, and yonder in foreign lands serve mankind more profitably than here. But then his oath to stay by this unfortunate people and either to conquer or perish with them occurred to him.

He occasionally went up to Bart's to see his growing son and to give him instruction. Erlefried only half listened while his father was speaking, looked at him coldly, then left him. The inhabitants of Trawies had plundered Bart of nearly everything. But at the same time they had shaken his hand in a friendly way, begging him not to be offended, for this was the new custom. They had also advised him to join them and to take his share of the booty. Bart did not join them, however, did not even go down to the valley, but planted his grain and vegetables in isolated parts of the forest; he gathered wild fruit and concealed it as well as he could from the robbers. The wandering bands of

young men and women willingly passed the old man by, but they had discovered in the house in the Tärn a fine young lad, whom they hoped soon to have with them in their ranks.

Erlefried was as loth as his foster-father to accompany the band, and was constantly obliged to flee from them. His favourite place of refuge was down in the Dürbach gorge, where a sweet little maid was patiently nursing her dying father in their lonely home. He performed many a kind office for these poor people. But he was frequently forced to flee to the mountains or into the depths of the Ritscher forest, for his father had said to him: "Thou art innocent, thou must keep out of sight. Go into the wilderness among the wolves rather than join the people of Trawies."

The young man had one experience which proved the cleverness of Bart's household, and this finally ended the pursuit of the carpenter's son by the rabble.

It was during the winter. Bart's house was surrounded by a wall of snow formed by the wind. Through this wall an entrance had been cut, and a footpath had been shovelled leading to the valley.

Mistress Bart sat in the gloomy room, spinning yarn from flax grown the previous summer upon an isolated clearing of the Birstling. Bart usually sat near her at his loom, but to-day he was out in front of the house, on a bit of bare ground protected from the snow by a crudely improvised roof of boards. He and Erlefried were busy killing a young pig for the approaching Christmas.

And while these four inhabitants of this mountain home were thus occupied, in spinning, in killing, and the pig in dying, a little boy came running up from Stossnickel's hut, with a breathless "Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon to thee," answered Erlefried, and he added good-naturedly, "Come here, Natz, and I 'll cut off thy ears," which office he had just performed for the pig.

Little Natz was neither frightened nor impressed by this offer, but stepped up to the men lisping:

"They are coming!"

"Who?"

"The people are coming!"

"What kind of people?"

"The Trawiesers. I saw them down there, and they 'll be here in no time."

Erlefried started. The Trawiesers! Then he must flee, for he already knew that they were searching for him in earnest to join their band. That he would not do; he must escape from them if possible. But where, at this season? The snow blocked every path: grinding his teeth, the lad grasped the bloody knife. The old man had let his fall and was calling upon God and the saints.

"Thou old simpleton," cried his wife from the house, "at such times one should call upon the devil; he is the only one who can help us with these people. Run, Erlefried, and crawl into the straw."

"'T would be the most stupid thing he could do," said Bart; "if they know he is here they 'll

turn the house upside down until they find him. Why not bury thyself in the snow, Erlefried ?”

“ It will do no good,” said the lad ; “ if they are bound to have me they won’t go away without me. They set fire to Josa-Hannes’s house, and at last the heat and smoke drove him from his hiding-place. To run up the mountain would also be useless ; I could not make any progress in this snow—and then the tracks !”

“ ’T is a living shame, boy, if thou canst not get away from these brutes !” cried the woman in tears.

“ I think so too,” replied Erlefried, helplessly.

“ I have just thought of something if thou art only clever enough,” said the woman.

Bart replied : “ I think, old woman, that all of us together have as much sense as thou alone.”

Turning towards the little messenger, who was still waiting, she said : “ Natz, thou art a good lad, and if thou wilt come next Sunday I will give thee the kidneys from the pig. Now, hurry down the path as fast as thou canst. When the people see thee and ask where thou art going, tell them there has been shooting at Bart-from-Tärn’s to-day, and that thou must go for the grave-digger. Then hurry on and be prudent.”

The boy started and Bart called to his wife : “ Thou stupid, what ’s the meaning of all this ?”

Passing her hand over the whitewashed stove she wiped it on Erlefried’s face until he was as pale as a corpse.

“ Now, child, thou hast the right colour ! *In Gottesnamen*, lie down on the bier.”

They understood at last.

“Perhaps we shall succeed. We’ve nothing to lose by it.”

They discussed the matter hastily, smeared the boy’s hair with blood; the clothes were already somewhat bespattered. While Bart was burying the pig outside in the snow, his wife was laying Erlefried out upon the bench between the spinning-wheel and the stove. He stretched his slender, well-formed limbs upon the board, crossed his arms upon his breast, let his bloody head fall backwards, the unkempt locks hanging over the bench. The woman then placed a carved crucifix in his hand, hung a rosary upon it, and, as was the custom among the peasants at that time, laid dried daisies upon his breast. She covered his body with a large linen cloth, saying: “Now do not stir again.”

She then arranged a few things near the bier which are accessories of the dead, among others the burning lamp. When all was finished, she stood a while quite still, then whispered anxiously: “Speak, Erlefried!”

The dead man did as he was asked and the woman was reassured.

Bart now hastened in: “Is it ready? They are coming up the hill.”

Seeing Erlefried lying there he started back in fright, then smiled.

A number of men already stood before the house, a lot of miserable wretches, staring fixedly at the bloody snow where a few moments before had lain the little pig. They attempted to enter the house,

but Bart's wife met them screaming: "It's time you came, people, it's time you came; there's no more living in this place!"

"What has happened?" they asked.

"Robbers have been here and have killed the boy. Don't you see that blood? *Jesus Maria*, it makes me faint to look at it!"

She played her part well. Bart crouched upon a bench by his loom.

The men who had entered the house looked with uncertain glances at the bier, dimly lighted by the little lamp. They then seated themselves at the table and noisily demanded food.

The woman brought some watery milk. She was obliged to taste of it herself first, for the people no longer trusted each other.

"Don't you worry!" she cried; "if I had poison in the house, I would n't spare it, you may be sure of that. I do not care to live any longer in such a world!" And she burst into tears, her cries resounding throughout the house.

The rabble devoured the bread and milk, and a few began a search for something better.

The woman, busying herself in the neighbourhood of the bier, noticed that Erlefried was trying to repress a sneeze. Hastening to the spinning-wheel, she set the clattering thing in motion. Bart comprehended. He rose slowly.

"What is the use of despairing?" he sighed. "No God can change things for us now. Work alone will save us!" And seating himself before his loom he began to weave as noisily as possible,

till the men were unable to hear each other's voices, and the lad on the bier could sneeze to his heart's content.

At last the intruders arose and one of them, seizing the old woman by the arm, said: "Uncover the body!"

"Whoever wants to see it must uncover it himself," she replied. The man approached the bier, drew back the cloth from the head, thus disclosing a pale, distorted face. Starting back aghast, he whispered: "'T is the son of our captain!"

"Murder for murder, that is the way this world retaliates!" muttered a man in the crowd.

Then, shuddering, they left the house. When they were gone, the woman wiped the sweat from her face and Bart said: "I prayed with all my heart that it might succeed. Now, Erlefried, get up."

The lad rose, washed himself, and murmured: "I'll never do that again!"

"Thou wilt not need to," said the woman; "they think thou art dead now, and will leave thee alone. And things must be better some time!"

No further search was made for Erlefried, the carpenter's son. Even Wahnfred supposed for a time that his child had been murdered. He made no complaint; he considered it God's judgment and wept thankful tears that Erlefried had left him during the innocent years of his life.

CHAPTER XII

AT times Wahnfred felt benumbed and discouraged, but all the more did he sacrifice himself for Trawies, which was being dragged down by every possible ill. He did not realise how much energy he possessed; his life, hitherto withdrawn from external things, had been a subjective one. He searched the Old and New Testaments for light to illumine the horrible darkness enveloping himself and his fellow-beings. But he had grown to hate the Bible; it had led him astray,—had, as it were, placed the murderer's axe in his hand. The wrathful laws of the Old Testament, had they not actually challenged him to perform the deed? And even in the New Testament he had found no help. From this book, called the legacy of love, had been drawn the horrible curse pronounced upon them. The Old Testament had provided the parish of Trawies with an inhuman criminal; the New, with inhuman judges! His heart filled with passionate longing, he searched for a new revelation. He regarded himself as a Moses in the wilderness, whose duty it was to lead his lost people towards a brighter future, and to seek for ways and laws to guide their erring footsteps.

One night, after a sad and weary day, as he lay upon a bench outside of his house, it came to him suddenly, as if he were listening to a strange voice—man's struggles are all in vain, the world belongs to the devil! Was there not some such declaration in the "Revelations of a Pious Hermit," which he had found in the hermitage? He had cast the thought from him, but he had now experienced such striking proofs of the truth of the statement that he began again to consider it, brooding over it day and night.

He finally resolved to leave the house by the Trach and to flee from the people of Trawies, who were heaping crime upon crime and who had chosen him for their leader; he would not go beyond the ring of fire, but into still greater solitudes of the forest, there to ponder the strange doctrine from which he hoped to evolve a new teaching to save this perishing people.

Near the summit of the Johannesberg, upon a small clearing close to the precipice, where the rising sun casts its rays while the other peaks are still wrapped in darkness, and from where a view may be had far and wide over Trawies, stood at that time a human habitation. It was the roughly built hut of a poor woman, who had watched the herds of the Trawies peasants during the summer months. She was the widow of a wood-cutter, and beyond this fact no one knew aught of her and her child, until the attention of the people was excited as they accidentally learned that the child had grown into an extraordinarily beautiful young girl. And one day

the widow was found strangled in her hut and the girl had disappeared, leaving no trace behind her.

This was the roof which now afforded Wahnfred shelter. Here he planned to lead the life of a hermit, and here he hoped to discover the true way to salvation.

He told the people that he was going away and that they must not ask him where. He promised to watch over them, and some day to appear again among them in glory and power.

He saw how attentively they listened to his words, he saw their inclination towards the mysterious, even as he had already noticed in these poor outcasts an inner longing for some religious faith. In their hearts they felt a certain anxiety, although desiring something quite different from what Wahnfred was seeking. They wished to enjoy with their senses: Wahnfred sought the peace of the soul. They wished for heaven: Wahnfred sought for God.

They swore that he should still remain their captain. They did not realise how he suffered, nor what he was planning; they were made of a different wood from that found in the workshop of this carpenter.

Wahnfred now took up his abode in the hut on the Johannesberg. He brooded, he dreamed, the strange "Revelation" germinating and growing in his heart. After he had remained in seclusion for months, one morning at the foot of the Dreiwand, just below the spot where the people's church and heaven had been taken from them, the following mysterious writing appeared:

“ First: God creates heaven and the angels to dwell therein.

“ Second: The angels become rebellious before God and He casts them out into a wilderness called Earth. There they live in bodies of clay and are given over to trouble. Before their souls may leave these bodies, they shall do penance for their arrogance by a life of humility; they shall expiate their selfishness by self-renunciation.

“ Third: Those who succeed in this may ascend to the eternal heaven; those who fail, return to an earthly body, and they continue to return until they are freed from sin.”

Through the dewy branches of the trees the sunlight fell upon the stone, before which the people had gathered to see the strange writing, their excitement increasing as they endeavoured to interpret its meaning.

“ Oh, yes,” said the hunter from the Trasank, “ I have often had the feeling of having lived many different lives in this world.”

“ I think I still have traces of Herod in me,” said Little Baumhackel; but another man retorted, “ You seem more like Judas to me.”

“ I must be Abraham with my house full of children,” said the peasant Isidor.

“ Oh!” cried another, “ he never came back to earth; he was a good man and has long been resting in Abraham’s bosom.”

“ Who? He, himself?” asked one of the men with a laugh.

“ This writing explains,” said Roderich, the

tramp, " why we always say of a good man, when he dies: ' He will never come back again.' "

Thus they interpreted the new revelation, and after they had jested about it to their hearts' content, they ceased thinking of it and continued in their accustomed ways, which grew more evil from day to day.

Wahnfred perceived that the words on the Dreiwand were not the right ones, but he did not rest; he sought with his brain, he sought with his heart, for a Saviour, for a God. How and where he would find Him and what the expiation would be—did he dream that ?

In a side gorge of the Rockenbach stood the little house of the wood-carver, Zirmer, who by peddling his wares in the country outside earned a bare living for himself and his large family. At the time the ban was placed upon Trawies, he was absent on one of his wanderings. On hearing of the misery that had come to his home, he turned about at once, walking day and night to reach his family. The last night of his journey he stopped with a relative in Neubruck, who sought to keep him, telling him to thank God that he was outside the ring of fire, and that he should not think of returning to Trawies, where everything had been cursed. Zirmer paid no heed to this advice; his feverish brain thought only of his wife and children. The sentinels at the " Five Pines " grinned jeeringly as he passed by. When he reached his house, he fell exhausted at the door, and now he lay ill and dying. His wife remained faithfully and courageously by his

side; but when she was alone or her husband slept, she wept bitterly. "To be in such distress," she cried, "such dire distress and to have no helper on earth or in heaven! And here art thou, my good husband, come home to die, and we have no Saviour for thee. If mankind could only realise how sweet, how trifling is all earthly suffering, if one may only hope for God's mercy in the life eternal! But to be in such misery—and to have no God! deserted, lost forever—forever!"

The sick man only said: "Let me die! Let me die quietly and follow me soon!"

"Where then?" she cried. "When I think where we must go, I tremble. We are damned, we are already in hell."

When the poor woman heard of the writing on the Dreiwand, a cry of joy burst from her lips and she wept aloud.

"Praise God! Thank God!" she said; "we shall find our God again!"

Such was the passionate longing for the comforts of religion in many souls of the outcast Trawies.

Wahnfred sat in his mountain hut reflecting and brooding. It was the month of May and nearing Whitsuntide. "Nowhere in the world," he once thought, "can this season be so lovely as in our region; but only upon peaceful hearts does the sacred dove bestow the blessings of Whitsuntide."

In such hours the man was almost happy. The tender forget-me-nots looked up at him affectionately, as still reminders of her who had once taken

so loving a part in his life. A short time ago, a dandelion was holding up its golden basket to receive the diamond dew-drops; to-day its hair is white and a gentle breeze is thinning its locks. High above in the sky glows the sun-star, casting its burning rays upon the beings of the earth who are thirsting for light. Whitsuntide! Only a few months ago the year was lying stiff and cold; it now rises in renewed youth, like the miraculous bird in the fairy tale.

“Is it then true,” thought Wahnfred, “that man’s inclinations are so evil? We stand erect, our feet treading upon flowers, our brain nourished by the light of heaven. The sorrow of the heart, what is it but a longing for goodness and happiness? Is it a misfortune if we are sometimes threatened by the darkness of storms? Storms bring lightning which illumines our minds with its fiery tongues. Were there no night, who could gaze into the starlit sky? But they come, the ungrateful sons of earth, and cry, ‘The mother is evil!’ And they think that they prove it. But I say, ‘She is good!’ and I do not need to prove it. Doubt has entered my heart; sorrow has clutched me by the hair; hate has poisoned me; love has tortured me; injustice have I experienced,—yet a thousandfold more injustice have I done!

“Over beyond these mountains are here and there patches resembling silvery lakes, upon which sunlight and shadow are playing. Those are cornfields. The budding ears are listening to the song of the lark, as they turn skyward, asking for sunshine—

their Whitsuntide prayer. Their ambition is to ripen, but the ripening means their destruction; at least that is how we men interpret it. The grain of corn is buried in the earth, and the next year its stalks will again be waving in the wind—perhaps in greater abundance than to-day. Life does not diminish, it increases!”

Wahnfred then looked out once more into the distance. A soft haze lay over mountain and valley; the waters of the Trach, the Miesing, and the Rockenberg glistened like silver chains amid the green meadows, and the walls of the closed and ruined church shimmered like snow.

“If I were that God,” he thought, “Who, as our faith teaches us, is just and merciful, I would to-day put an end to the misery down there. Are not the mountains of the Trasank, the sea of clouds, the fire from heaven in His hands? In a year flowers would bloom upon the scene of destruction and all would be well!

“If one of our human race should suddenly have control of human affairs, would it not be better for us than as it now is, with a Something over all Who does not understand and is not understood, Who heartlessly plays with our hearts, Who does not smile at our brief joys, nor weep when we go to destruction? It is a monster, false, dangerous, fascinating, for it calls itself God. The good God! The dear Heavenly Father, Who encompasses the earth with a wreath of stars, and fills it with a sea of sunlight, that its outer splendours may satisfy His eye! He troubles Himself but little concern-

ing those who suffer and despair within. And should He be called to account for this He is the stronger, and to shield His own power He names Himself the All-Wise One.—But does He name Himself? Was it not the craven human souls who have made of this Unknown Something a gracious, all-powerful, all-wise God? Oh, how cowardly to ascribe to God deeds which we perform ourselves! And did not God come to us in human form to redeem the world?”

These were the different thoughts that filled the poor man's brain.

It was midsummer and Wahnfred wandered through the forest. He often stopped to listen to the twittering of the bird that had its home in the densest group of pine-trees, a home before whose door the spider had built her lattice-work. In a song without words—in music—we comprehend only that which we ourselves contribute, our own feelings and experiences. So Wahnfred, the God-seeker, was inclined to interpret the sweet notes of the birds as a revelation.

He sometimes lay for hours, stretched upon the grass, oppressed by the heat of the day and by the weight of his own thoughts. Dreamily he gazed heavenward to watch the dream pictures in the sky. For are not the clouds, in their fantastic, ever-changing forms, now light and airy, now dark and threatening, vanishing as they form, forming as they vanish,—are they not the dreams of the sky? They are moving from west to east—the sky is

dreaming of the Orient, of that paradise which it has watched over lovingly with its blue eye, kissed fervently with its sun's rays, and watered with its dews. O youth of the world! The stars move in their endless course from east to west, only the clouds take the opposite direction, in longing remembrance of thee, lost youth of the world!

Wahnfred also possessed a nature that lived in the past rather than in the future. More frequently than ever he thought of the Gestade, at the foot of his mountain. There had lived his mother, there had lived his wife, there he had spent his childhood, and there he had had a child of his own. His dearest happiness had come to him there, had visited him in his little workshop. All was over now, but for the sake of that sacred time he had no right to curse the world. He had become unfaithful to the truest friend he had: work. To restore law and order in the outcast parish should now be his penance for his evil deed.

His heart filled with joy when he began to see the beauties of nature as of old. O human eye, how beautiful has the world made herself for thee! Everything which comes from Nature's breasts is pure and clean. Perhaps the fountain of humanity also was once clear and fresh and the stream has only become muddy by its long course, for it has taken up the dust of the world and lost its way in aimless space, embittered by the continuous struggles of its waves, even as sea-water becomes bitter and only returns to its purity after mounting in clouds to heaven and falling thence to the earth

again. Expiation in dissolution and a better resurrection after the fall! To this goal Wahnfred's thoughts turned as a magnet turns to the north.

Far beyond the mountains, on the sunny plains, shimmer the yellow fields. "O happy land, where bells and scythes are heard!" he cried. "Yes, yonder is peace; there the mowers are harvesting and the earth has opened her arms, offering her fruits, her blood, her heart, in gratitude to man for having trusted her in the spring. The stalks of grain stand with bowed heads awaiting the scythe, and the fields have decorated themselves with cornflowers and red poppies in celebration of their sacrificial day. Ah, when shall we gather another harvest in Trawies?"

Wahnfred looked up; the dream pictures had vanished and how changed was the sky! Above the peaks of the Trasank huge piles of threatening clouds had gathered and were descending over the cliffs and upon the heights of the Ritscher and of the Wildwiese. A rumbling of thunder was heard, the full force of the peal failing to penetrate through the thick-falling fog, but reaching the ear like a half-smothered rattle; here and there flashes of lightning glimmered faintly through the mist.

It had grown so dark that the gleam of two glow-worms shone from behind the leaves of a hawthorn-tree. And now the storm began to rage, tearing down from above and up the mountainsides, whistling and hissing through the trees and frightening the birds from their nests. The wind played havoc even with the small plant-growth on the heath,

throwing up the sand and earth. A blinding sheet of flame formed a huge cross in the air, and where its shafts struck the ground a burning tree was standing. A sea of mist was flying over the crashing trees. The clouds burst and descended in floods. Dust, moss, and twigs were tossed into the air, only to be crushed back into the earth again by heavy hailstones; and then all were plunged in a brown, foaming stream to the depths below. Wahnfred saw nothing but the whirling grey mist, pierced by red bands of flame, heard nothing but the roaring as of a mighty sea. The rolling stones, the crashing trees, the peals of thunder, had become one sound. Like the breath of a god, blowing creation back into chaos from which it had sprung, so the elements warred, as though one would merge into the other in the struggle.

Wahnfred was thrown into a thicket; sight and hearing failed him. "Thou poor human creature!" he thought, "thou hast hated also; how childish was thine envy, how insolent thy scorn, how petty thine anger compared with this anger of the eternal forces that, with one blow, avenge everything, expiate everything! And thou dardest impute mean human motives to Him, Who in His majesty and power scorns and destroys us as He wills! The dangers into which our own sins plunge us are alone fatal. In the war of the elements, we may be quite calm."

Such were the thoughts of the God-seeking Wahnfred. The storm passed. The largest trees of the forest were broken, the fragments still being

swept down by the rushing stream. The cliffs were stripped bare; everything green had been carried to the valley below. The outline of the Trasank was sharply defined; a light mist hovered over its rocky sides. The valley of the Trach was white; a bit of winter had been hurled down upon it. The mountains on the other side stood out clear and distinct, and above the forest slender threads of smoke rose here and there. Light clouds were floating across the sky; the sinking sun was smiling back a "Good night." Far over the plain the storm was receding, and against the grey sky—as though made from a lightning-flash now held in thrall—was outlined the half-circle of the rainbow.

Wahnfred returned to his hut, where he sat through the quiet night, reflecting and dreaming. He had almost forgotten the past; he was thinking of what the future would bring. He longed to break the fetters that bound him to his ancestors and to their faith, for, guided by that, had he not destroyed the religion of the parish of Trawies? His mission now was to find for them a God.

It was already late in the night, and the sleepless eyes of the man sitting in front of his hut were gazing vaguely before him, when suddenly, below by the cliff, he saw a little light flickering among the branches. It swung to and fro, gradually drawing nearer, and finally the beautiful face of a young girl, illumined by the ruddy glow, appeared out of the darkness. It was Sela, who approached him with these words: "The fire guardian delivers the fire into thy hands."

CHAPTER XIII

SELA could not be persuaded to remain upon the Johannesburg until morning. She returned to the valley, alone, as she had come. The tall pines stood erect, raising their knotty branches higher than ever in their pride at having so successfully battled with the storm. The moon's rays fell between the dark branches, a feeble light indeed to guide the wanderer, who had carried her lantern up the mountain and now returned silent and trembling.

She had fulfilled her mission; now she had only herself to care for, now she could look her sorrow in the face and weep.

During the storm of to-day her father had died. His eyes had quivered before a flash of lightning, then closed for ever.

Sela was returning home to watch by the body. As she was climbing over a hedge on the hillside, she did not notice the dark figure standing there, which moved when she had passed and followed her. She hastened more rapidly, as though suspecting that someone was behind her. Suddenly she stopped before the roaring Trach and could go no farther. The flood had carried away the bridge and the waves were beating madly against the banks.

Towards Trawies lay the open valley, and the moon was shining down through the gap upon the rugged rocks.

She stopped, not knowing what to do next. The dark figure then approached, calling her by name: "Sela!"

She did not start, for she knew the voice well, but she could scarcely believe that her friend could be so near.

"Sela," he said, "do not fear; I am Erlefried."

"How can it be possible that thou art here?" she asked.

"It is no miracle—I was just walking here. Take my hand, and I will tell thee; but we must go back into the woods a little, away from the noise of this roaring water."

He led her a short distance into the forest, saying: "The storm to-day was so terrible that I was worried lest thy hut might have been injured. So I came down to the Dürbach gorge and there I saw thee walking with a lantern. It was already dark and I followed thee. In Trawies no maiden can now rely upon her guardian angel. I thought thy father might have sent thee to the herb-doctor, but instead thou didst climb the Johannesberg and I have waited for thee."

"Erlefried," answered the girl, "thou art very good to me—I am always thankful to thee, but my anxiety is now doubled. Thou knowest that the people must not see thee."

"That is why I always walk at night," he replied; "and whoever meets me takes me for a ghost. It

is fortunate for me that ghosts still exist. I wish we could be ghosts ourselves for a moment, that we might fly across the stream; we cannot remain on this side, unless we spend the night below at the Gestade where my father's house used to stand. We dare not go up to Trawies, and it is impossible for us to stay here."

Then Sela suggested that they might go to the house on the Johannesberg.

"I hate people," answered Erlefried.

"But thy father lives up there."

"I know it. I am afraid of my father."

Sela was silent. She was thinking of what this son had just said. He was afraid of his father!

"I believe—" said Erlefried, embarrassed, and then he stopped.

"What dost thou believe?"

"I believe there are people in Trawies who have sold themselves to the devil."

"*Mein Gott!* thou dost not think that of thy father?"

"Not exactly, but I know others who are none too good to do it."

"Erlefried," replied the girl, after a pause, "how could a man sell himself to the evil one?"

"Easily enough, if he wished to. But he must be in earnest."

"Well, who would wish to?"

"Who? Oh, there are many people who would like to, in order to have everything their own way, and for this they need help. God—supposing the Trawiesers had a God—does not always grant our

prayers. So the people look for someone else. We could make use of the devil ourselves to carry us over the Trach."

"Do not say such wicked things, Erlefried; we can build a bridge."

Laying a bridge would have been useless, for the Trach was rising every moment; the water was rushing down from the farthest gorges of the Trasank, bringing with it stones and earth and many utensils from houses and barns. But a little farther along, where two rocks confined the river in a narrow space, the storm had thrown an old larch-tree across it, thus forming a bridge. Through the thick interwoven branches of this tree the two young people were now obliged to work their way. Sela clung to one arm of the young man, while with the other he swung himself from branch to branch, at the same time supporting his companion. How long a time had elapsed since that sweet Midsummer Day when Erlefried had carried her, as now, across the Trach! What a bright, happy time it had been!

But that was the day on which was born the demon that in combination with the wild forces of nature now ruled in Trawies, bringing desolation and destruction upon it, like the flood tearing down the Trach, which the young couple were now struggling to cross.

At last they reached the other shore, and as they were ascending the mountain, Sela told of her father's death. Erlefried brushed the tears from her eyes with his slender fingers saying: "I will

help thee bury thy father, even as thou didst stand by me when I lost my mother. We will give him a deep grave in the woods and cover it with stones."

She was silent. How could this dear friend be so heartless? Bury her father!

They then crossed the hill. The sky had become cloudless, the moon was shining brightly. A deep stillness reigned over all; not a bird was stirring in the branches; even the young people stepped softly. They walked close together, forming one shadow. Erlefried was conscious of his youth and strength.

"I will not leave thee, Sela," he cried; "I will stay with thee in thy house and protect thee, as thy father has protected thee, and love thee as Erlefried has always loved thee."

"Thou wilt stay with me?" murmured the girl anxiously.

"I will stay with thee," he cried. "I will never leave thee. I will be with thee through all eternity."

"Not yet," she pleaded.

"Yes, Sela, now. Thou shalt light the fire, I will lock the house. We belong no longer to Tra-wies; we will not fly to strange lands, we will belong to each other! Sela! Sela!"

Hastily seizing her in his arms he kissed her brow and her eyes, and was about to kiss her lips, but refrained, pressing her hand to his own instead. He drew her quickly on towards the house in the Dürbach gorge.

Sela did not resist. They hastened, they tore down through the moist, cool forest, over fragments of trees and hailstones. They said nothing; their flying feet were the only expression of their feelings. Sela longed to reach her dead father, yet felt alarm the nearer she approached the hut. The youth, suddenly overcome by the passion of his love, thought little of the dead man. Winding his arm about the girl he almost carried her, and her feet scarcely touched the ground. Thus they descended the hill, the roaring of the Dürbach growing nearer and nearer.

At last they were in the gorge and as they climbed over the fallen trees and débris, feeling their way and looking anxiously about them, Sela suddenly stopped and exclaimed: "The hut is gone!"

"But where can it be? It must be farther down."

"It should be here, opposite this great rock. My God, there is a new mountain! Erlefried, Erlefried, the hut is buried!"

An avalanche had descended, bringing with it trees and bushes. Sela threw herself upon the mound, digging the earth away with her hands, until Erlefried forced her back, saying: "See, God is still in Trawies; He has buried thy father!"

The gentle words, so full of meaning, opened the floodgates of her poor, sore heart, and she wept bitterly. "God has buried him!" The thought comforted her, for she had trembled to think that she must lay her father in the earth without a blessing or the tolling of bells. And besides, she had

been terrified at the idea of living on in the gloomy hut, either alone or with her friend. Now that was all over, and her path in life must turn here.

They seated themselves upon the moss-covered rock beside the Dürbach, and there they remained the entire night, gazing at the huge pile of earth which made the fire guardian's grave. Erlefried's passionate mood was calmed and changed into warm sympathy and reverence.

He longed to speak comforting words to her, but she did not hear him; the roaring of the torrent was benumbing her senses. The moon sank behind the trees, the soft rays penetrating through the branches, touching the stones with silver, and causing the waves to sparkle. A broad band of light shone upon the mound from which the broken trunks still projected. A mysterious atmosphere lay over all, and the moonlit sky seemed to be filled with airy forms descending and ascending like angels on Jacob's ladder.

"Sela," said Erlefried, leaning his head against the little head of the girl beside him, his long locks falling over her forehead, "Sela, see! our ancestors are coming down to thy father who has so faithfully guarded the fire! And they will now lead him to heaven by this path of light."

When the sun was rising above the blue forest of the Tärn, Erlefried led Sela into Bart's house.

He related what had happened, begging Bart to give the girl a home and his protection.

"It is thy request, Erlefried?" asked Bart; "I

hardly know how to understand that. Yes, I will give the child a roof so long as I have one myself. I am glad to have Sela in my house; only, Erlefried, thou art well aware that we often do not know what we ourselves shall eat."

"I will gather my food in the woods as I have been doing," said the girl.

"But where will she sleep?" asked the old man.

"In the barn on the hay," proposed Erlefried.

Mistress Bart, who for some time had been watching the two young people standing beside each other, so innocent, yet so full of life, now interrupted: "The men may sleep in the barn, Erlefried, and, for all I care, Bart also; the girl shall sleep in the house, her bed next to mine." And to this Bart agreed.

CHAPTER XIV

DURING this same period a report was circulated that the Tärn forest was dying. It was nearly four miles square, and on bright summer days it lay like a still, blue sea under the arching canopy of sky. No one saw the endless movement and life going on within its cool, shady depths. The thousandfold births and deaths of the little creatures, the warm heart-beats, and the hot struggle for existence,—the constant activity of Nature's loom,—who paid heed to it or realised it ?

And who troubled themselves about the lost people dwelling in the Tärn ? For a long time the trees had concealed them with their heavy branches. In Trawies, the central point, a kind of community had developed, but in the depths of the forest another life was hidden. Many of the old people were astonished at the gradual disappearance of the vagabond element that had streamed in at first. Did these tramps and outlaws feel themselves too good for Trawies, or were they seeking a still more evil place ?

The forest of the Tärn, compared with the Romanesque style of the deciduous trees outside, resembled a Gothic cathedral. The murmuring of

the Tärn was like a melodious organ, contrasted with the rustling leaves in the valley. The Tärn was night: other forests were twilight. The Tärn consisted mostly of firs not planted by the hand of man, but grown up in wild confusion from the seeds of their forefathers. Since time immemorial the Tärn forest had been standing; storms, avalanches, fire, and the axe had made but little impression upon it.

Sections of it had been given over to wood-cutters, and the fire guardian was once heard to say: "It is the same with trees as with men, they must go upon the battle-field in their best years." But the unseen sower was ever at hand, gathering the seeds and scattering them over the barren earth. Thus sows the wind. So the Tärn stood upon its stony ground increasing in size and luxuriance. Many of the trees were hundreds of years old and hundreds of feet in height, so large that two men could not encompass them.

But few paths led through this forest, and even during times of peace it was avoided. The ground was mostly bare, except for its carpet of grey moss and pine-needles, and it was seldom lighted by a ray of sun. Here and there towered a barren rock, or the skeleton of a mouldering tree-trunk. Near the summit of the gently ascending slope, far away from the paths of men, stood a wooden cross.

Few came to pray before it, and none knew why it was there. It bore neither the image of the Saviour nor any other sign; towering in its solitude, amid the deep silence broken only by the

murmuring of the wind in the branches, it was almost terrifying to behold. Some imagined this to be the spot where the hunter, St. Eustachius, while still unconverted, once had the vision of a deer, with a crucifix between the antlers. Others insisted that the cross grew from the roots of a tree, and that it exactly resembled, in size and form, the one upon which our Lord was crucified.

Still others related that it was from the time of Grüner Wolfgang, once the terror of the hunters in the Tärn. He is said to have always worn twigs, leaves, and flowers from the green forest upon his garments; his hat, his coat, his stockings were also green, his hair and beard white, his reputation black. Whatever sin Grüner Wolfgang may have committed, his appearance was not evil, and he nursed and cared for the forest as one would care for a beloved child. He himself lived, like the trees, in the open air and even in his old age was hale and hearty.

But he was proud and defiant withal. Seldom descending to Trawies, he did not go to church or to the tavern. Hence his bad reputation. His house stood in the woods, his nourishment he procured with the aid of his gun; he had a thousand resting-places in the forest. On one bright summer noonday, he was lying upon the soft moss under an arching tent of firs. The birds were silent, the beetles were crawling lazily under the network of roots upon the ground, a gay butterfly was fluttering from branch to branch; the forester slept.

For a while he slumbered quietly, the busy ants

running over his limbs. Gradually an uneasiness took possession of him, he sighed and groaned, and when at last he awoke, it was already evening. Rising quickly he looked anxiously at the slender trees and up into their branches, then hastened to his house. And soon afterwards, upon the spot where he had slept, he erected the cross.

The old forester lived some time longer, but finally died without the people having discovered why the heretic had set up the cross in this wilderness.

Grüner Wolfgang was the last forest-keeper in the Tärn. After his death it grew wilder and wilder, for now it had no master. Many a proud tree looked scornfully down upon the cross, thinking: "Thou hypocritical wooden thing, why art thou here?"

We have already learned of the avalanches and storms which prevailed in this region. During the previous spring it had been the same. Changeable weather, first melting, then freezing, had left the falling snow clinging to the branches. Icicles and masses of snow had formed, dragging down the boughs with their weight, bending the young trunks and breaking off the tops. And later, when the snow had melted and the violets were in bloom, the finches and buntings wondered why the trees, usually so proud, bowed their heads and hung down their arms dejectedly when it was the season for sprouting and budding; wondered why so many beautiful little firs lay upon their decaying bark in the bright green sorrel, and that so

many of the tallest and oldest trees had lost their tops. The ruin was great, and thus the Tärn began to die.

There was no one left in Trawies to whom it occurred to separate the dead trees from the living, excepting Bart, who shook his head, for he knew it would require many hundred wood-cutters to remove the fallen trunks.

One day, in the following spring, Baumhackel, the former forest-keeper of Trawies, discovering an old root-digger working about the trees in the Tärn, reproached him for injuring the roots with his iron puncheon.

“*O lieber Gott!*” answered the old man, “my iron does little harm, but I will show you something here that does more!”

He led him to a log lying in the moss, and tore off a large piece of bark. “Do you see the letters which are carved in the wood?” said the man. “Can you read them? That is the death sentence of the Tärn!”

“Nonsense!” muttered Baumhackel; but inwardly he was terrified at what he saw. Countless little paths led from one chief entrance into the very heart of the log. They were the passage-ways bored by an insect, where, here and there a beetle no larger than a grain of wheat could be seen crawling among the thick, brown larvæ.

Soon after this discovery Baumhackel joined another forest tramp and together they discussed the different crimes being perpetrated in this region.

“Whom are you tracking now?” said one.

"The fox, and I know where he keeps the dove hidden," replied the other.

"Do you mean Roderich, the tramp?"

"Whom else should I mean?"

"And the girl from the Johannesberg?"

"Don't be stupid! Of course I mean her."

"Where is she?"

"Do you think I'm fool enough to tell you? You'll have to look long before you find her. I'll only say that the rascal is still guarding her as strictly as a pious abbess would guard her youngest nun. The golden hair is growing fast and in a few weeks it will be cut again."

"Hist!"

The conversation was interrupted by a man with a load on his back, walking through the thicket. He soon disappeared, and the two loiterers also.

The Tärn was still spreading its green branches over all. Its stock was apparently richer than ever and many of the boughs broke from the weight of the cones. Numerous woodpeckers pecked busily at the decaying wood; they found an overabundance of nourishment.

But there came a time when the trees no longer sprouted. Bart shook his head again. By mid-summer the usually green trees had become a soft brown and the needles were falling to the ground.

Bart, whose house stood near the forest and whose fields were hidden therein, examined a number of the trees. In the outer and inner bark, in the wood, and in the pith, he found the fatal marks, the

countless passageways of the bark-beetle, the *mene tekel* of the Tärn.

“The forest is gone,” said Bart to Erlefried. “The curse spares nothing. I am terrified!”

Erlefried was silent. He also dwelt within the ring of fire, but he felt no traces of the curse in himself. He was full of joy and life. He was permitted to see his beloved Sela every day, but Bart and his wife were secretly watching over these two young hearts.

At another time the dying of the vast, glorious forest would have caused great excitement in Tra-wies, but now few paid heed to it and many considered it only natural that everything should perish.

At the end of the summer nearly all the trees stood stripped of their needles, stretching their bare, crippled branches towards heaven. A strong resinous odour was perceptible and the sun shone once more upon the ground of the Tärn. The homeless woodpeckers and crossbills, the blackbirds, jays, and sparrows, fluttered aimlessly about among the dry branches, where swarms of bark-beetles were seeking fresh wood for nests in which to raise their broods. Even those parts of the forest hitherto preserved by ravines and clearings were now attacked, and they, too, wilted and died.

Bart grew nearly insane at all this destruction. He realised for the first time how he had loved the forest. In his rage he would hunt for single beetles and stamp upon them with his feet. But when he saw that the forest was lost he longed to throw a

fire-brand into the dry, decaying wood. He then proposed that charcoal-pits should be started; the people laughed him in the face.

“For what do we need coal when we have no forge?” They were right. The road to the outside world was barred.

Now the streams began to run dry, and the stones grinned up at one jeeringly from the gorges and ravines.

When the covering of the forest was thus removed, the rabble who had taken refuge there came forth, fleeing like a brood of beetles when the stone under which they have lived is raised. Where only the smoke rising above the forest was formerly visible, the hearth-fire itself now lay exposed to view, with the miserable beings crawling and creeping about it among the dead trees. Here were disclosed the wretched huts and caves filled with all kinds of plunder. Here were people living in luxurious abundance; there, hollow-eyed forms perishing with hunger and envy.

The narrator of these events has fortunately been deprived of a brush with which to paint the crime in all its horror. But he must at least call our attention to the misery here revealed. Fighting and murder were not the only results of the lawlessness, from which arose, first, right of might; then, revenge unto death. And their stolid, beclouded natures were soon at home in the paths of sin.

Of neighbourliness, brotherly love, or even family ties, there was scarcely a trace left in Trawies. The people formed in bands as it happened. The older

ones dragged along as best they might in their accustomed ways.

Quite apart from the rest, in a large cave among the rocks, high up on the precipice of the Torstein, facing the east, Roderich, the tramp, had set up his fortress. He was the quietest and greediest of all, and had gathered about him the best and finest that Trawies had to offer. He did not want for fruit, bread, lard, and brandy; great piles of sheep's wool, yarn, fustian, and leather filled the strange apartments of his dwelling. He often sat in the stone niche at the entrance to his cave, gazing blissfully out over the blue hills towards the east, and folding his hard, rough hands across his knees he would murmur in a mood of thankful ecstasy: "I have never been so prosperous as now!"

Then he would retire into his dark abode, creeping past his stores, until he reached the inner cave, where the dim light of a tallow candle shone towards him. And it was here that he kept his talisman concealed.

The rocky wall was covered with moss and skins; upon the floor were spread woollen mats; there were many household utensils, even a dainty little table, holding images of the saints and the tallow candle. In one corner stood a carefully arranged couch of snow-white wool upon which lay a maiden of exceptional beauty. She was scarcely more than a child, and was in reality paler than she seemed by the dim light of the candle. Her large eyes were brown as two ripe cherries, and glowed with a mysterious light, which Roderich interpreted as a sign of a

passionate love. He reminded her many times a day of the asceticism of the saints, whose images he had stolen from the old houses in Trawies. And he also told her that the curse which had now fallen upon the parish could only be counteracted by an abstemious hermit's life, therefore he, old Roderich, would be a good, watchful father over her.

She lay now quite motionless, her face buried in her arms; had not the pulse moved slightly in the white wrist, Roderich would have thought her dead.

But he knew very well that she was alive. He approached her cautiously, turning away his face as if in fear of a slap from her hand or a scratch from her fingers. He examined her golden hair, which fell in short, unevenly cut locks over her white neck.

"Good," he murmured. "Good, Bertha, my heart, there will be more soon. To-morrow we will cut it again."

The girl now started up, endeavouring to push old Roderich away with both her hands.

He stood firmly and did not move.

"Leave me in peace, you fearful ghost!" she cried.

"You are the one who are making the disturbance," said the old tramp, with a grin.

"What do you want of my hair?"

"Why do you keep asking, when you do not believe my answer? But I will tell you once more,—that from your lovely maiden's locks I am twisting a rope with which to bind the devil that is now loose in Trawies."

“ You are a devil yourself,” cried the girl, with blazing eyes. “ You murdered my mother!”

“ What a hard creature you are to manage, little girl!” said the old man, smiling unconcernedly. “ Why should I have done the good woman any harm?”

“ You strangled her with a red handkerchief; then you put it into my mouth and dragged me to this cave. You are the devil, the devil, the devil!”

He forced her back upon the couch with his strong arm, hissing: “ Since you know it already, why should I deny it? Your mother hung herself on account of the curse in Trawies. You died of fright, and who should have you now, if not the devil?”

“ O my crucified Saviour,” cried the girl, trembling and wringing her hands, “ what have I done that Thou shouldst leave me thus!”

“ You know what a sin it is to be proud,” replied the old man, in his rough voice. “ You have been very vain of your soft hair, so it must do penance. To-morrow we will cut it again. Lie down and rest now; I will watch and see that no worse devil than myself comes near you.”

He left her, crawling out of the cave on his knees, and climbed down to the water—and he had not yet told the girl why he was keeping her, as a dragon guards its treasure, or for what he wished to use her hair.

When Bertha knew herself to be alone, she sprang up and sinking before the table tried to pray. But her prayer soon changed to violent weeping, which

re-echoed throughout the cave. She called for her mother; she called until her strength was exhausted, then sank back upon the couch.

When she awoke she gazed at her hands and felt of her face. The flesh had fallen away, but it was no wonder, for was she not already very old? Had she not been a hundred years in this terrible dwelling-place? She could not know that since she had been deprived of the light of day the trees had budded and withered but once.

Only in moments of happy dreams did she see the bright world and weep over its loss. Gradually she had become more stupefied; she could not believe that she was damned, but she did believe that the darkness of madness was coming over her, and the thought was a comfort,—and then, her life must end some time. So she became resigned, and in her most difficult hours she took refuge in prayer. At first she refused the food set before her, but after a while her hands involuntarily reached out for it.

The old man often came to her, busying himself to make her comfortable and trying to entertain her. From time to time he cut off her hair with a sharp knife and then departed, often remaining away for days.

One evening after barring the entrance to the cave carefully as usual, he hurried away through the woods. Formerly the trees protected him; now he must go out by night. He walked rapidly in the direction of Bart's house. He had not yet visited this lonely place, but he had an idea that it must

contain much that was desirable. Roderich carried with him that "Tried Remedy to Keep People from Waking,"—the candle made of adder's fat and maiden's hair. Many had experimented with it, but Roderich had at last found a reliable source for his wicks. And since then his magic candle had never failed him. To be sure, certain precautions were necessary. One should first pass the selected house by daylight, apparently admiring the flowers in the window, the birds' nests clinging to the walls and under the eaves, but all the time be secretly looking for the most favourable place for breaking in at night. Then an hour should be chosen when the people were fast asleep; one's feet should be shod in something noiseless, and one should have the proper utensils and keys. It would be still better to visit the houses when the inhabitants were off in search of plunder themselves. Nowadays there is never anything to be found in chests and drawers—one must search the cellars and attics, also under heaps of stones, under the eaves, or even in the thick foliage of trees. A man who has grown old in the profession knows all the tricks, and when, in addition, he has faith in his magic candle, his success is assured.

On the way the old rascal thought often of the girl whom he was keeping prisoner. He knew how to appreciate her. He was sometimes sorry that he was obliged to bury her so deep among the rocks, to frighten and discipline her so severely, but then the little thing was very stubborn. "When I go out of business," he thought, "perhaps I shall

marry her!" Ah, yes, old man, no one has ever guarded virtue more carefully than thou hast guarded it in this poor creature! It would be difficult to find anyone who knows so well how to make use of maiden's hair as thyself.

At midnight, with the aid of a rope-ladder, which he had secured to a pole by the window in the roof, Roderich crept into the attic room of Bart's house. He at once made himself at home and lighted his candle. It burned to-night rather unevenly and with a crackling, hissing sound. Everyone seemed to be asleep in the house, yet there were slight noises as if rats or mice were running about. Roderich grew a little uneasy, but at last all was quiet, and the old chests and wardrobes looked very alluring to the tramp. An inner warmth, like the glow of youth, took possession of him, and with gleaming eyes he began his work.

We will not be accomplices to the deed, but will enter another building on Bart's premises.

CHAPTER XV

IN the barn, on the fragrant hay, two men were lying. One, judging by the sound, was asleep; the other rose quietly and crept to the window.

It was Erlefried, gazing out into the night over at the dwelling-house opposite.

In the forest there is a saying that lovers—no matter how far apart they may be—have one moment daily when they may see one another. This moment, whether it occurs by day or by night, lasts just so long as it takes a dew-drop to fall from the top of a larch-tree to the ground. What if one should miss it!

This moment always came to Erlefried in the night, when old Bart lay asleep at his side. And the handsome, wide-awake youth took advantage of it; he would rise and look over at the house where Sela was resting—and thinking of him. For hours he would see her sweet image thus—a dew-drop requires much time to reach the ground, falling from the high branches of a larch-tree and stopping at every twig.

As Erlefried looked out of the little window of the barn on this night, he noticed a light in the attic, where Sela kept her wardrobe. Could she be

up still? Perhaps she was mending her gown, and might she not be feeling lonely? The water was trickling into the trough as usual; no other sound was perceptible; the stars in the sky shone brightly, the same as ever. The lad, too, felt lonely, and he longed to go to her in her attic room, to sit by her and hold the candle while she worked.

Then when, in preparation for the night she raised her arms to unbraid her hair—for she liked to sleep with it loose—she could not as usual cover her lips with her hands.

Erlefried slipped out quietly, found the door of the house, opened it, and climbed softly up the dark staircase. He knocked first at the attic door, whispering Sela's name, that he might not frighten her. At the same moment he heard a noise within, and as he entered, the room was dark and empty; the window was open and a figure was hastening away from the house. The thief had escaped, and the chests were still untouched. Erlefried stood there, hardly knowing what to think. For once he had mistaken the moment of the falling dew-drop. But what did it all mean? For a long time he sat upon the chest, then, as it was growing late, he stretched himself upon it and fell asleep.

The next day was the Feast of the Elevation of the Cross. But who thought of such things or wished to think of them in these woods? There were many who felt a longing for religious festivals; but even those who retained their faith were almost without hope. In Bart's house, however, it was otherwise; there no one believed in the curse or

that it would affect the innocent, and they all had hope in God and in His kingdom. Bart wished his household to observe the church festivals, although he took no part in them himself; he knew that he must bear his share of the curse.

To celebrate this Feast they usually made a pilgrimage through the Tärn to the cross which stood in the solitude of the forest and whose origin was so mysterious. Thither they went with reverent hearts, and knelt before it in adoration, praying for their absent friends and for the souls of the dead that might, even now, be writhing in the fire. They then sat about on the moss, ate their mid-day bread, and quietly returned to their isolated dwelling.

And this pilgrimage they were to make to-day. Early in the morning Sela mounted to the attic chamber to dress for the long walk. She gave a cry of alarm as she discovered a man lying asleep upon her chest. Erlefried sprang to his feet, not realising where he was.

"I should like to know what thou art doing here!" said Sela seriously.

"That must be very evident to thee," he replied; "I was sleeping."

"But thy bed is on the hay."

"That 's too hard."

"And thou hast found the wooden chest softer?"

"It is thy chest," he said defiantly.

"What is that to thee?" she asked.

"It 's everything to me. Sela, nowadays each chest should have a living lock."

“Thou must leave me now. I want to dress; I am going to the cross in the forest.”

“May I go with thee?” he asked.

“Thou wouldst better stay at home. I am quite familiar with thy piety on pilgrimages.”

“If even thy wardrobe is not safe up here in the night, it would be well for me to go with thee through the woods. That has nothing to do with piety.”

“Don’t be foolish, Erlefried,” said the girl, laying her hand on his shoulder and looking earnestly into his face. “Thou carest for me,—I know it; and I should not like to go through the Tärn without thee.”

And then they were both happy, very happy. Erlefried dressed himself quickly in his Sunday attire, putting on his brightest neckerchief; to-day he felt like showing some outward sign of the joy which filled his heart—for he was going with his beloved maiden.

Their way led them at first among fresh green beech-trees, whose branches were full of life and song. The other members of Bart’s household had separated themselves from them, for they knew of nothing more stupid than to walk with these two young people. “Birds of a feather flock together,” they thought, “and what is that to us?” So they let them go their way.

As they were walking quite alone on this cool autumn morning, Sela said: “Erlefried, I will not go with thee unless thou art good and wilt tell me stories on the way.”

“ Stories of the beautiful world ? ” he asked.

“ Or they may be of heaven, ” she answered.

“ Dost thou know the story of the two sowers ? In heaven two sowers are always busy, one sowing blessings in the earth, the other curses. ”

“ It seems to me that the first one is not very industrious, ” said the girl.

“ Ah, but he would be, only he never has seed enough, for his harvests are poor. On the other hand, curses grow by thousands, so they can be sown in great numbers. ”

“ That is sad, ” said Sela.

“ We will make it better, ” continued the young man ; “ the good which falls from heaven should be taken care of and be allowed to grow. We will do that, shall we not, Sela ? ”

She made no reply.

For a while they walked beside each other in silence. From time to time Erlefried glanced at his companion, noticing how beautiful she had grown. A soft bloom rested on her cheek. “ And in this garden of roses grew two violets. ” Her blond hair fell in long braids over her shoulders, and it was not strange that the young man should admire and love this girl beyond anything in the world. They were both young and they were conscious when their eyes met.

They soon came to the end of the dense, leafy woods and entered the barren forest of the Tärn. Here Sela was obliged to wind her braids about her head to prevent their catching on the projecting branches. The ground was strewn with dry twigs

which crackled under their feet; the sun rose higher and higher and the shadows cast by the trees resembled a thin, torn veil.

Erlefried, seeing a pale yellow saffron flower growing on a bit of meadow, asked Sela if she knew why this plant was poisonous? She did not know.

"Well," he explained, "because they have missed their chance, and old maids always poison themselves."

"Of course thou knowest about all such things," she answered curtly.

At last they reached a little group of white-pines that had escaped the forest plague and stood there in luxuriant green. They rested a while in the shade. Erlefried, gazing thoughtfully into the branches, and realising what a dangerous turn his thoughts were taking, asked Sela if she knew why every twig in the pine-tree formed a cross.

"Tell me, Erlefried."

"In olden times," he said, "the twigs of the pine-tree turned towards the sky like the palm. Since that day when a cross was made for Christ out of a pine, everything on this tree must grow cross-wise, just as to-day in Trawies, where no cross is allowed to stand, everything has become criss-cross."

"Criss-cross and wretched," added Sela.

"I am also a cross," said the handsome young fellow, straightening himself to his full height and stretching out his arms. "Wilt thou be crucified?"

"I prefer larches to pines," remarked the girl,

looking towards a spot where one of these trees of the northern forest stood in its bright, soft green.

“ Shall I tell thee the story of the larch-tree ? ” he asked. “ See, then, it is just the same with trees as with people. Once upon a time the trees were standing together one Sunday to choose a king. The spruce-tree cried : ‘ I am the most beautiful ’ ; and the fir-tree : ‘ I am the tallest ’ ; the pine-tree declared : ‘ I am the most industrious and the most useful ’ ; and to prove this it had brought a Scotch-fir all the way down from the Trasank to cast a vote in its favour. Finally the larch-tree arrived, the beautiful, strong, delicate larch-tree, and the others thought to themselves : ‘ Beside this tree we have no chance, for it is the noblest of all. ’ They then postponed the election of their king until winter. I believe, Sela, I ’ll postpone the rest of this story until winter. ”

“ Go on, go on, ” she said ; “ we know of nothing else sensible to talk about. ”

“ Thou art right, Sela, when I am with thee the brightest ideas occur to me, but I cannot express them. Well, in the winter, as the evergreen-trees assembled once more, the larch-tree refused to come. Three times it was called, and when it finally arrived it wore a mantle of snow, which the others insisted upon its removing at once. This it did most unwillingly, for underneath it was bare and naked, with no green needles like the rest. They laughed it to scorn, and the spruce-tree was chosen king. Since that time the larch-tree keeps by itself, but in the spring when the soft green,

feathery foliage reappears, it is even prouder than the king. It is also a fact that in the larch-tree husband and wife are one."

"Now thou mayest stop telling thy tree stories," said Sela.

"And there 's a bird called a lark that sings wedding-marches."

"I should like to know, Erlefried, where thou hast learned all these stories," said the girl in some confusion.

"Whoever goes about much in the woods sees them," he replied. "Not so very long ago, I noticed up on the Freiwildhöhe how a fine, young pine-tree, under which the image of the Virgin used to stand, had chosen a beautiful wife for himself."

"Thou canst not think much about people, because thou payest so much attention to the trees," remarked Sela.

"I do not wish to be for ever thinking of people; that is not good for one."

"Indeed! That is something quite new to me."

"Besides, it 's of no use. I don't care for animals; the dry wood I hate, so I turn to the green things. But, however much I love the trees, I am always with thee, Sela; they send me back to thee."

"That is very kind of them!" she answered.

"Thou couldst never guess what the pine-tree on the Freiwildhöhe did lately. It occurred to him to take a wife. In the neighbourhood were nothing but little, crippled creatures. So he thought that rather than give his children such a mother, he would remain alone. And then he reflected that

he was no worse off than our human father Adam, who took his wife from his own ribs. So he waved one of his red catkins to a beautiful tree in the distance, sending a little seed from his own heart to do his wooing. And she was wise, Sela, and did not refuse her lover. And then I thought of thee again!"

He fell on his knees before her, but the girl proposed that they should proceed on their way, at the same time springing to her feet. The young man followed her quickly but silently.

They now penetrated still deeper into the dead Tärn. Soon not a single green tree was visible. The sun was blazing. This summer there had been no rain, and strong winds had swept the last remaining needles from the branches. The dry trunks and the ground beneath were palpitating with the heat. Lizards darted hither and thither among the stones, but there was scarcely any other living creature to be seen in this curious wilderness. Even the swarms of bark-beetles had disappeared. While still at some distance, our two pilgrims noticed the cross towering amid the bare trees. There was no one there; they seemed to be the only visitors.

To Erlefried, the imaginative son of an imaginative father, the cross in this forest had always been an object full of mystery, of which he often dreamed. So now, reverence for it conquered for the moment all other feelings in his heart. Removing his green hat, he silently approached the cross and knelt before it. He thought of that time when, as a boy, he had returned to his mother with-

out God and without hope. "He exists. Thou knowest it, thou lovest Him; heaven and earth are His body!" Thus had she comforted him.

Sela also experienced moments when the whole frightful misery of Trawies filled her heart with pain. At such times she could not smile, she could not hope or pray, and she knew no other way of escape than to close the eyes of her soul and to banish everything from her mind.

And to-day she had come to the cross without really knowing why. The ruined forest was not calculated to brighten her mood. But now, as she saw this beloved friend kneeling before the cross, praying reverently, she was deeply impressed. It refreshed her like cooling dew, and she, too, knelt and prayed, prayed as she had not done for a long time. And her heart softened and grew so light that she sobbed for very joy.

Could the people of the outside world, who had cast the fire-brand into this quiet valley, only have seen these two innocent beings kneeling here in the bare forest before this isolated cross! But no one saw them, nor even imagined them. The sole thought given to Trawies was that there rebellion, crime, and hell reigned supreme. Sela and Erlefried, the children of the rebels, they were forgotten and deserted.

At last Erlefried rose from his prayer, seated himself in the shade of a large trunk, opened a package of provisions, and prepared a luncheon for Sela. They sat beside each other, eating their bread in silence, while the sun was moving westward. They

then rested a while, and Erlefried turned his face up towards the sky, but his view was cut off by the dry, interwoven branches, which resembled an endless spider's web. As he lay thus, he suddenly said:

“Sela, I love thee more than ever!”

“How shall we get home to-day?” said the girl.

“Oh, the walk will be pleasant,” replied the young man; “the sun will not be so hot and the air will be cool.”

“I am afraid we shall lose our way!” Sela did not say this, but thought it. She was anxious, though why, she did not know. How did it happen that no one besides themselves had visited the cross to-day? Had she suspected this, she would not have come with Erlefried. She would have liked to start for home at once, by frightening him with ghost stories and tales of robberies, but then she would be frightened herself and he would laugh at her. However, she made the attempt, timidly reminding him of the tramps wandering about in the Tärn.

“Yes,” said Erlefried, “and for that reason, I think we should avoid the beaten paths and go through the densest part of the forest, to escape being noticed.”

“Even there we cannot escape the wicked *Traut* and *Anweil*.”¹

“The best precaution against such ghosts is for us to keep together.”

He put his arm about her waist: “I am strong, Sela, thou canst trust me.”

¹ The two hobgoblins of the Styrian mountains.

She looked at him. It was a long, deep, peculiar look—imploring, reproachful, hopeful, anxious, all in one. She threw herself once more before the cross: "Protect us! Protect us on this day!"

Then they started, hastening through the Tärn towards the western hill, behind which towered in the distance, like a blue triangle, the summit of the Johannesberg. A heavy peat-smoke floated over the region, making the air sultry and close. Masses of clouds had formed, which soon changed into innumerable tiny particles, as if an invisible hand had shattered them. In another part of the sky were long bands of cloud, forerunners of wind, while over the forest a deep silence reigned.

At last our two wanderers reached a bit of green meadow, bordered by huge trunks of the primeval forest, now bare and naked. Here in this isolated spot Erlefried proposed that they should stop and rest. Sela looked at him once more, stepped a little to one side—and disappeared. The young man hastened hither and thither, from tree to stone, from bush to bush, searching everywhere in vain. Suddenly he was startled and terrified by a harsh laugh. It came from between two rocks close beside him. A thin hand reached out, then the bristling head of Roderich, the tramp, appeared.

"Young man," he muttered, as Erlefried stopped and looked at him with darkening brow, "your sweetheart left you at just the wrong moment."

"What's that to you, you old thief?" said Erlefried defiantly.

"Such a fine young man and such a misfor-

tune!" said the tramp. Then, raising himself to a sitting posture, until he resembled Lazarus emerging from his grave, he continued: "Never mind, pretty boy. I'll tell you something. I've been watching you for some time and I've thought to myself: As he's now managing things, he'll never get anywhere. You look here and there, you ask, you humble yourself, and get nothing in return. If you want anything very much, you must do as the rest: sell yourself to the devil!"

"That is an idea; I'll sell myself to the devil then!" snarled the excited, trembling lad. Passion and anger confused his brain—besides, he belonged to a superstitious age.

"If you'll come with me, you'll get what you want this very evening," said the old man slyly, "but you must help me first. I've had a bad day to-day. A band of robbers fell upon me and crushed my foot; I've been lying here for hours, and can go no farther. If you'll take me up the gorge to the precipice yonder, I'll then bid you good-night."

The tramp had not spoken the truth. The crushed foot was a fact, also the impossibility of proceeding farther without aid; but no robbers had attacked him; he had met his misfortune when plundering himself. As he sprang from the window of Bart's house, he had injured his foot and had dragged himself with difficulty to this spot. Erlefried did not dream that the man cowering before him was the thief he had frightened away from Sela's chest the night before. He only knew that his present duty was to act the Good Samaritan,

and he supported the old fellow through the gorge, all the time looking for Sela right and left.

“ You ’re looking in vain,” said Roderich, bearing down heavily upon the strong, young shoulders. “ How well I know that stamp of woman! They won’t be caught in the woods, but run to the churches, awaiting their lovers at the altar. They want the marriage sacrament and then they are content. Since we now have no church, we must arrange something else. As the father killed the priest, the son will surely get on very well without one. Do you suppose I don’t know you, young man? Don’t look so black at me; you are son of the great Wahnfred, who brought this people to their destruction, yet who would now forbid our plundering! But I ’ll not betray you. Just hide in the Tärn, as I am doing, and have nothing to do with the robberies outside. ’T would be a pity if it should be discovered that the dead Erlefried had come to life again. You should keep out of sight. Take the girl you want and avoid those who want you. You see, you are driven to it by necessity. Sell yourself to the devil!”

“ The devil take me if I don’t do it!” cried Erlefried, passionately excited, and all the more because the old tramp had recognised him.

“ You please me,” murmured Roderich, limping beside the young man. That which he was wickedly planning made him almost forget the pain in his foot. “ It would be better, though, that the devil should take you to-morrow than to-day—for it ’s already dark. Come with me.”

“ I ’ll call him on the spot ! ” said Erlefried stopping. The proverb proved true in his case : “ Fire in the heart makes a smoky brain . ”

“ Call him when you are alone , ” replied the old man , who felt no desire to meet the devil in person to-day .

“ Take my advice . You know the Devil’s Stone ; it ’s up on the hill , not far from Ulrich’s , the charcoal-burner’s hut . You ’ll find many well-known names written there . Everybody is a fool nowadays who does not make a compact with the Prince of Darkness . When you come to the place , open the vein in your left arm , dip a withered straw into the blood , and write your name upon the stone . In the same moment the devil will stand before you , but will not frighten you ; he ’s not so terrible as people who have never seen him imagine . Perhaps he ’ll appear as a beautiful boy , or as a young girl , or in the form of a deer or a green tree . The dark gentleman has all kinds of disguises . You must step right up to him and boldly ask for what you want . And be sure and not forget the most important things . The time when he shall take you , you yourself decide ; not that you ’ll be fool enough to limit it to eighty years , or a hundred . That ’s too short . But listen , my handsome youth ! fix the time on the Corpus Christi Day when there is a new moon . ”

“ I do not understand , ” said Erlefried .

“ You know , don’t you , ” said Roderich , “ that on that day the devil can take us all ? ”

“ That will probably be true in Trawies in a very short time , ” remarked Erlefried .

“Young man,” said the tramp, clinging to Erlefried like a snake, “he who sells himself to the devil never looks again at the calendar. The new moon and Corpus Christi do not fall upon the same day once in a hundred years, and if they did, since Trawies is excommunicated, no more Corpus Christi festivals can be celebrated here, therefore they could never fall upon the same day with a new moon. Do it as you like, and thank you for helping me.”

They had reached the foot of the grey precipice at the top of which the tramp had his nest. The old man had understood how to entice the boy with him by his conversation, as long as he needed his aid. Here he must take leave of him and climb alone to his cave, did he not wish to disclose its whereabouts.

Erlefried went away in the darkness, confused in mind and looking for Sela, yet going in the direction of the Devil's Stone. He was dazed; the delusions of superstition had entirely unmanned him; the fire-ring of passion was closing about his trembling heart. Following the tramp's advice he walked rapidly to the Devil's Stone. As he bared his arm he saw the scar made by the shot which, as a boy, he had received upon the Wildwiese, and on this scar he pricked himself with his knife.

The little drop of blood was still clinging to the straw, and the last words of his oath were fresh upon his lips, when from the neighbouring Torstein he heard a cry. It seemed like a woman's voice. Was his new comrade to show himself already? Or could it be Sela?—At the moment when he felt the

blood flow from his arm a cold shudder had passed over him. And now? It was no longer so much the woman, it was the dear, protecting friend for whom he longed. The cry on the rock was repeated. Erlefried climbed to the place whence it came.

CHAPTER XVI

AS Roderich, the tramp, sat upon a pile of underbrush, collecting his forces for the climb, two men armed with cudgels passed by. One of them struck a light, and discovered the crouching figure of the man before he had time to hide behind the bushes.

“ Oh, here 's the fox ! ” they cried, one of them seating himself on the right of Roderich, the other on the left.

“ We are very glad to find you, for we have a question to ask you. ”

“ Well ? ” said the tramp, grinning.

“ Roderich, where have you hidden the beautiful girl ? ”

“ What beautiful girl ? ”

“ The one you found on the Johannesberg. ”

“ She 's my daughter. ”

“ That has nothing to do with it ; all we want is to know where you have hidden her. ”

“ That I will not tell. Leave me alone ! ”

“ You leave the girl alone, you rascal ! To-day you 've got to tell where she is, or we 'll beat you to death. ”

“ You would n't, as honest men, want me to

give her up for nothing?" replied the tramp dejectedly.

"Very good. We'll give you twelve *Schinderlinge*, if you are honourable."

"I am honourable, but the twelve *Schinderlinge* are worthless in Trawies. You know that."

"But our *Schinderlinge*, my dear villain, are good money!"

They held towards him a handful of heavy gold coins. He looked at them and his fingers twitched convulsively.

"Give them here!" he said.

"Not until we know where you have hidden your shorn lamb!"

"Why should n't I tell?" answered Roderich. "For several days she has been in the Rabenkirche, by the Trasank. Give it here!" and he stretched out his hand for the money.

"And you think we trust you? Ha, ha! Roderich is n't such a child as that! You shall go with us, and when we have got the girl you may have the money."

"Very well, if you want to carry me. I've hurt my foot and cannot walk a step."

He showed them his badly swollen limb, and, in doing so, succeeded in snatching the coins. They had no desire to carry him the long distance to the Rabenkirche; the old man already had the money in his fist; so one of them said: "We know his nest and we want the money ourselves. He's a crippled old villain. Let's kill him!"

"That would be the most sensible thing to do,"

added the other, throwing his lighted torch upon the ground.

Then followed a desperate struggle, and a cry of terror resounded throughout the gorge.

In the meantime, the underbrush had caught fire from the torch, and the flames were spreading in the dry Tärn.

CHAPTER XVII

WAHNFRED sat upon a stone on the Johannesberg gazing over the smoky valleys and ravines of Trawies. The blue clouds sometimes ascended part way up the mountain, bringing with them the pungent odour of burning wood. On the other side of the Trach below the Ritscher, as far as the eye could see, lay the lake of fire. During the day the dense smoke partially concealed the flames, but at night the Tärn glowed like the fiery pit of hell. When the east wind blew, the crashing of branches and the groaning of falling trees could be heard, even on the Johannesberg. The wild creatures of the forest came flying hither to take refuge in the green woods on this side of the Trach. It was already late in September, but in Trawies both day and night were warm and the dew had ceased to fall. The wind from the direction of the Tärn brought with it gusts of hot air, and high up on the Transank, where it came in contact with the colder atmosphere, clouds formed, sending forth now and then flashes of lightning.

Wahnfred sat on the stone looking down over the valley. What the people were doing he could not see, but he supposed that they were busy fighting

the fire and he hoped that this work might produce a good effect upon them. One night, as a strong wind fanned the flames to new fury, the hermit on the mountain was almost certain that they must reach the Ritscher and the forests of the Dürbach, the Miesing, and the Trach, thus burning the very heart of Trawies. Then he longed to descend, amid all this splendour, and proclaim his new gospel to the outcast people. He felt that the hardened hearts in Trawies were like iron, which must be melted before they could be made plastic.

The fire extended far up the cliffs of the Birstling, but was soon extinguished in the underbrush and was then once more confined to the Tärn. And Wahnfred remained upon his mountain.

The forest, which on that evening when the two men had murdered old Roderich, the tramp, had been accidentally set on fire, burned for many days. No one had made the least effort to save it, and the flames flew mockingly from tree to tree, as the swarm of bark-beetles had so recently done. The fire did not seem to come from without, but to burst forth through the cracks in the bark, from the hollows and cavities which the insects and woodpeckers had bored. Then the flames danced about the trunks, forming little tongues which licked the topmost branches, and forked out on the dry resinous boughs, eddying like a wild whirlpool. The smoke was light which rose from this furious fire; only, when the trunks broke and fell in the moss, dense clouds would form, glowing for a long time with the sparks from the burning mass.

The flight of the rabble, who still had their nests and caves in this forest, was a strange one. Some howled and cursed, others made wild jests, congratulating themselves that hell had come to Trawies, for now the Trawiesers would be saved the trouble of going to hell. But at last even their jeering mouths were closed. A whirlwind came down in the night from the mountains of the Ritscher. At first, like an invisible broom, it swept the flames along the ground. Suddenly they soared aloft, a raging, hissing stream of fire, a monstrous jet of flame, lighting the deepest gorges of the forest.

And high in the air was a commotion such as had never been seen before among these mountains by the Trach. Masses of brush, borne on wings of flame, flew in circles, scintillating and sparkling, disappearing in smoke, springing forth again, shooting upwards like rockets, flying hither and thither, trembling and broken, and miles away falling to the ground in a rain of fire.

The soil of Trawies had been more faithful than the people. The few industrious ones, who had cultivated the gardens and meadows in isolated spots, were rewarded by rich, often luxuriant harvests, "as though"—says the chronicle—"the soil were filled with pity for the tears that watered it." And also where the ground was left untouched, wild fruits grew and ripened, offering food to those unwilling to work. The herds of cows, goats, and sheep wandered half wild about the meadows and

forests, and there was many a struggle over their possession between the owners and the plunderers; but the domestic animals could not be quite exterminated, for, after all, they were a source of nourishment; even the rabbits and deer still flourished, in spite of the continual hunting. The chamois of the Trasank, the beasts of prey on the Ritscher, and the fish in the Trach seemed to be constantly increasing. The customary food and clothing had long since been abandoned, and the half-savage Trawiesers contented themselves with rough garments and the coarsest food, and one might say of the latter that it almost grew in their mouths. And added to this was the booty which they brought in from their various expeditions to the outside country. Thus they lived. But each one struggled for his existence among enemies.

Old Bart had all that he could do, during the forest fire, to defend himself and his household. He felt the greatest anxiety about Sela—she was the most precious treasure in his house, perhaps in all Trawies. The hay-mow, where he had slept with Erlefried, was no longer a safe hiding-place, for here tramps often passed the night, after having searched and plundered the house and pantry. Below the hay-mow, between two thick walls, was a small, dark storeroom, where, in better days, the oats had been kept for the horses. For years the only occupants of this little room had been the grey spiders, whose webs hung from the ceiling, catching the dust and dry seeds that had worked their way in through the cracks of the wall. Here Bart

concealed the fire guardian's daughter, often for days at a time, passing her food in through a little opening. He himself slept close by in the sheep-stall,— which had been entirely emptied by robbers,— that he might guard her the more securely. Near his bed, against the wall, stood a sharp axe, ready for anyone who should try to molest his treasure. His old sickly wife felt perfectly safe in the house; she needed no axe to protect her, and there was scarcely anything of value left to steal.

Sela suffered indescribable torments in her isolation. They did not come from the dark chamber, where gnats and spiders were her only companions; it was not the fear of being discovered that was breaking her heart, but the pain over her irreparable loss.

Since that evening when she had deserted her playmate and friend she had never seen him again. After losing her way many times, she had at last arrived safely at home that night. He had not followed her, nor had he been seen by anyone. She had left him to face the dangers of the wilderness alone. And why? Because he loved her, because he wished to kiss her lips and press her to his heart.

Sela could not think of it without risking the loss of her mind, but at last she could think of nothing else, and her senses were benumbed.

“Why was it,” she asked herself, “that I could not embrace the man I love so much? Oh, would that I might now press him to my heart and kiss him until my lips bleed! Who in heaven or on earth has ever bidden me to repel him when he

looks at me with his dear eyes, or when I feel the warmth of his breath, for which I long with all my soul? Who has commanded me? My mother? She used to sing to me the song of the false lover in the green woods. No one could be more faithful than Erlefried. It is something else in me which has made me repel him. I cannot understand it."

And she wept and dreamed and continued her raving. "Could it have been the sunshine, illuminating the clouds? Could it have been the old trees surrounding us, or was it the evil one who came when I called on our guardian angels? Now he is gone, and she in whom he trusted deserted him. That pains like death!"

Old Bart had been out to search for Erlefried; but the trees of the Tärn were already burning. According to Sela's statement, the fire had broken out at about the time she had left him.

"Why didst thou run away, thou thoughtless child?" Bart asked her.

"Why?" she replied, "because I was afraid of him. A viper had stung me, or I had eaten a poisonous berry, I do not know which; but I became confused and did not know him."

Bart asked no further questions, but again went out, wandering through the smoke among the charred and blackened trunks, seeking for Erlefried as if he had been his own child. At last there remained no doubt but what he had met with some misfortune. Bart did not believe his own words when he said: "The boy is bright enough to have escaped in time to the top of the Trasank."

“Why should he ascend the Trasank,” thought Sela, “when he wants to be with people?”

Her sole wish was that he might be living, yet she prayed that he might be dead. She feared that, if alive, all was not well with him.

“Father Bart,” she asked one day, “when will the ninety years be up?”

“What ninety years?”

“When the ravens meet in the Rabenkirche to report upon those found murdered during the past years, and to reveal the murderer. If it comes on Christmas night, I will go and listen.”

“Do not be superstitious, my child,” answered Bart. “We are in God’s hands. Do not forget that.”

“We, in God’s hands?” asked Sela.

“Do not believe it when they say that our God has been taken from us. No one is powerful enough to do that; that we can only do ourselves. The Eternal God is not to be given and taken. We only need to desire Him to possess Him.”

This was not an answer to her question, but she grew calm. Thoughtfully she gazed up at the gauzy veil which the spiders had wrought in her little room, that at night was illuminated by the fire in the Tärn. And once, as she was watching a little creature spinning its thread down from the ceiling, she thought: “If it spins to the floor, I shall see him again, that I will faithfully believe, and it will come true.” The spider stopped for a long time at one point,—then spun to the floor.

After the Tärn had burned nine days and nights

it was consumed. Here and there from out the white ashes rose a charred trunk. Many rocks were now laid bare, disclosing the yawning entrances to dark caves. High above all still towered the cross, now visible far and wide. The bark-beetles had spared it, the flames had flown over it, and it now reigned supreme in the forest of the Tärn.

BOOK III
THE EXPIATION

CHAPTER I

ON a late autumn day, during this same period, a strange darkness settled over Trawies, causing great uneasiness in the minds of the people. The sky was perfectly clear, when suddenly at noon the trees by the Trach ceased to cast shadows; a deep gloom rested over mountain and valley, and bats were flying hither and thither. The light of the sun was nearly extinguished and only the outline of the orb remained visible. Stars were shining overhead, but their appearance was weird and unnatural.

One of the oldest inhabitants, in his fright and consternation, waved the old banner of Trawies, declaring that the evil dragon, which was always following the sun, was now engaged in conflict with it. He even said that he could see the sun struggling in the clutches of the huge black monster, about whose neck it was endeavouring to cast its ring. Should the dragon come off victorious the end of the world would be at hand; should the sun be conqueror, the world, with its interchange of day and night, winter and summer, might continue to move on in its course.

“The sun may shine in other places,” said one

man, "but for Trawies its light is for ever extinguished."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed another; "God allows the sun to shine upon the just and the unjust."

"But not upon the just and the damned!"

"Then we must make the most of what little time remains, for never in all eternity shall we have things so much to our liking as at present."

Some of the more intelligent of the inhabitants realised that this night in the midst of day was merely an ordinary eclipse of the sun, which would soon pass and had no greater significance than that the plague or the Turks were coming. And they were right, for in an hour it was all over and the sun shone brightly as before, showing not the slightest trace of its conflict with the dragon. Soon after this the report was circulated; "The Turks are coming!"

These words were fraught with terror in former days, for Trawies could still show many a memento of deeds of cruelty performed in olden times by the hordes from the East. Now the news made little impression excepting one of curiosity and satisfaction. The Turks would be congenial companions to the Trawiesers in their present condition.

From the summit of the Rockenberg and the Johannesberg a strange light could be seen at night rising over the distant plains, and news was brought from the Trasank that Neubruck and Oberkloster were in flames.

This caused great rejoicing among the people, who said: "The ring of fire with which the au-

thorities once surrounded Trawies is now extending outwards. It will not be long before the rich and noble men of Neubruck and Oberkloster and Altenziel will come and take refuge in our woods and caves: they will be most welcome!" But they clenched their fists as they spoke and gripped their daggers more firmly.

The boundaries were no longer guarded, and grass was again growing on the spots where the fires were lighted at the time of the ban. The trees to which the symbolic cord had been fastened were sprouting anew, or had withered and died. The neighbouring villages, even those at some distance from these ill-famed forests, had erected gallows as a welcome to visitors from Trawies. The more charitable people outside, however, had made a few attempts to open some kind of friendly communication, silently ignoring the ban in their desire gradually to bring the parish back to civilisation. But the rabble in the forests would have none of it. They were quite content with their savage freedom and felt no longing for taxes and slavery, or for military service, which would endanger their lives without fair recompense.

One day a man from Neubruck, fleeing from the Turks, took refuge in Trawies. He brought with him the following report of the condition of things outside: War in the east, war in the west, and war at home. Grasshoppers had destroyed the harvest, the Ottomans had emptied the larders, desecrated the churches, and burned the cities. The ruling prince was quarrelling with the bishops, and the

bishops were calling in the Hungarians to their aid; a new enemy, but one whose cruelties were no less severe than those of the Turks. And further, during these last years, Jews had taken up their abode in the land, pursuing the pedlar's trade, drinking the blood of children, and poisoning the springs. They had been ordered to leave, but had not gone: as soon as the present enemies were dispersed, however, the extermination of the Jews would begin. Trawies was invited to take part.

One of the Trawiesers replied: "Why should we trouble ourselves about the Jews? What we want is to exterminate the priests and noblemen!"

"But do you not know," said the man from Neubruck, "that the Jews have brought a horrible plague into the country, which is spreading by means of the rivers and streams? Many infected homes have been burned and whole villages quarantined. One Jew was caught in the act of putting poison into a well; he was thrown to the dogs."

The people of Trawies listened to these horrible tales with beaming faces, and when the stranger had told all that he knew—and possibly more—for the benefit of his listeners, they robbed him of his money, his cloak, and his boots, then mockingly invited him to join them in the hunt. He wandered about for a few days in the shadow of the forest. He lived upon herbs and whortleberries, finally taking refuge in a half-ruined hut, where he died a miserable death. When the body was found, it was covered with black spots.

"Let no one touch it!" said the horrified people,

hastening away. Drawing a wide circle about the hut, they placed it under the ban, even as they themselves had been deserted and cast out from the world. But all in vain! The black death had sown its seed in Trawies and the uncontrollable pestilence now began.

It spread from the lower Trach to the Dürbach gorge, from the Trasank valley to the Rockenberg, and the people, in their fright and despair, fled from place to place. They knew that medicine was useless, so they sought to protect themselves with oracles and amulets. But the Heavenly Powers recognised no prayers from Trawies.

As the pestilence increased in force, many resorted to brandy, and comparatively few of the drinkers succumbed. Thus Ursula, the schnapps distiller, rose in the estimation of all.

The few sober inhabitants endeavoured to preserve the last remnant of order. The houses and huts where deaths from the plague had occurred were burned or closed; communication almost entirely ceased; the people fled from one another, and where intercourse was necessary it was held across streams or fires, for they had discovered the purifying effects of fire.

“We should have another Tärn to burn,” said one.

“Let us set fire to the Ritscher,” proposed another.

“To plunge into the flames ourselves would be the quickest remedy,” said a third, with a hollow laugh.

“The devil is tightening his infernal net about us,” they cursed.

They hoped that in the autumn the frosts would destroy the poison, and the winter passed without demanding many victims. But when the sun again stood high in the heavens, and the snow had melted, causing mists to rise in the valleys, the pestilence broke out anew. And on Midsummer Day—this joyous festival of happier times in Trawies—countless fires were burning as of old, but they were more like the sentinel fires upon a battlefield than those which formerly celebrated the sacred feast. Here burned a house whose last inhabitant had died; there blazed a brushwood fire between two men who were taking counsel together; and yonder a wood-pile was burning, about which a whole family, trembling with fear, had gathered; for this advice had been sent down to them from the Johannesberg: “Depend upon the fire!”

“Yes,” said an old Trawieser,—it was Rocken-Paul,—“I should have some faith in that, if we still had our ancestral fire: the heat from the ring of flame brings no healing.”

The chronicle gives us one touching picture from out this gloomy period.

At the upper end of the Trasank valley, close to the mountain, stood the house of Sand-Nantel. He had taken Josa for his wife without much ceremony, but they did not mingle with the new parish, managing to nourish themselves from that which grew among the stones.

One day, Nantel, with a cry of terror, staggered

and fell to the floor; his wife sprang to his side, but he motioned her back: "Leave me alone; do not touch me! Go to the children!" he gasped, trying to rise without her aid.

"What ails thee, dear man? Where wilt thou go?"

"To the brook. Away with thee! I must have some water,—look at these black spots,—I must wash myself!"

Drops of cold sweat stood upon his forehead and he fainted.

Josa bathed the feverish skin, gave him water to cool his burning tongue, moistened his dim eyes, and did not leave him.

"Thou shouldst have left me," he murmured. "I would rather be drowned or be buried alive than to have this happen; for then I should not have exposed you all."

"No, Nantel, thou wilt not die. Thou wilt live."

He laughed a hoarse laugh, then added softly: "I hope, dearest wife, we shall all live again. If thou lovest me, go to the children now—and let me sleep."

It was already late in the night and Josa left him; but when a few moments later she returned, the sick man was not there and the outside door stood open. She ran out, calling him by his name, which the rocks mockingly re-echoed to her. It was a terrible night for the poor woman. She did not find her husband till morning; he was concealed in a thicket, lying in a deep, newly shovelled grave, partially covered with earth. So Nantel, preparing for the

worst, had dug his own grave, and had laid himself therein to die—that he might not expose his wife and children.

It was as if Fate were touched by the loyalty of this brave heart; in Nantel's family no other member died, and they were all able to escape from the wilderness of the Trasank, away from the fated region, after watering the beloved grave with their tears.

CHAPTER II

ON one of these days of indescribable misery the people of Trawies ascended to the Wildwiese where formerly the Midsummer Festival had been celebrated.

They were not assembling for counsel or to seek aid from one another, for they were helpless and utterly discouraged. And in not a single soul could be found the peace of resignation. They all trembled at their present hopeless condition and were terrified at the thought of death. But they had been told that on the mountain the air was purer than in the valley. Near the waterfall, at the edge of the precipice, they built a huge fire, about which they gathered in a semicircle. Each endeavoured to avoid the other, yet fear and the longing for friendly intercourse drew them together. If one spoke, the other tightly closed his lips, or nibbled a bit of gentian root, and mothers no longer kissed their children. They sat close to the fire, for that was their only remedy. Had it been possible they would have drunk the flames. As evening fell and the precipice glowed from the reflection of the fire, they still sat or huddled together before it, like a frightened herd of sheep exhausted by the pursuit

of wolves. Most of them knew not whither to turn; their own hearths among the grey rocks of the Trask valley or beneath some old, decaying pine-tree were roofless.

A poor, emaciated woman suddenly appeared in their midst, her eyes beaming with joy. She related that just now, when gathering herbs on the hillside, she had heard a strange sound, and what should it prove to be but the church bells of Trawies!

The church bells ringing! The crowd started at once and rushed to the edge of the precipice, from where they could look down into Trawies. They heard nothing, however, but the roaring of the Trach. Some of the company sneered at the idea that there could still be people among them who were startled at the sound of church bells; but there were others who bowed their heads as they remembered the time when their sorrows and joys were carried heavenward by the voice of the bells. Oh, those happy days, when the Church, with the sweet, comforting tones of her bells, sang her children to their eternal rest! A sad farewell from this world, but a joyful message of welcome from heaven.

And now, how horrible death had become for them, with no comfort here and no hope hereafter! A strong, powerful man, the most savage among these woodspeople, stretched his arms out towards the star-lit sky, and like one drowning, cried in a wild, despairing voice: "Thou hast deserted us, Thou terrible God!"

One by one they returned to the fire and contin-

ued their cursing and praying. The cloud of smoke arched like a protecting roof over these homeless ones, like a cathedral over the faithful. They gazed into the fire, as though they would bury therein all their woes; as though, like that repentant robber chief in the legend, they would here burn their hearts, that their souls might soar to heaven in the form of a white dove.

But what was that dark object yonder in the glow? It seemed to be rising from the very flames. Those who first saw it started back with a cry of terror, shielding their faces with their hands. Upon a rock, behind the blazing fire, as though wrapped in a mantle of flame, stood a human form—it was Wahnfred.

His eyes glowed with a solemn light, his hair and beard were long, and his face was flushed. A dark mantle covered his figure, making it appear more slender and more weird. His hands were clenched, but gradually they relaxed.

“His ghost! His ghost!” whispered the crowd, each trying to hide behind the other.

Then the powerful voice of Wahnfred, who, having descended from his mountain, now appeared to be rising from the fire, cried out:

“People of Trawies, do not fear or do not rebel. I come to you bringing you the mercy of God.”

The murmuring and whispering ceased. With glances of astonishment or of defiance the people gazed across the fire towards the rock where this strange man stood. Not a sound other than the crackling of the flames and the roaring of the

waterfall was heard, until Wahnfred again raised his voice and, with the earnestness and reverence of a prophet, began to speak:

“Trawies! I have found God. He Whose blessings no man can give, and Whose curse no man can remove, sends me. He has always been with you; you have seen Him, but you have not known Him. Every hour of your lives is a gift of mercy from Him; no deed takes place which His fiery eye does not witness. You have not known this, therefore you have grown evil; the presence of God makes only those happy who believe in Him, and you have been damned because this faith has been taken from you.

“People of Trawies! I give Him back to you. The same old, loving, terrible God. He has awakened you to the light of the sun, He has smitten you with His lightning stroke. He has looked down at you from the stars, has smiled at you from the altar lamp. When the powerful ones cast you out, He embraced you with a ring of fire and He built His temple in the Tärn. You gather around Him now, knowing that His warm breath will protect you. He is everywhere, even where He is feared. He quivers in the clouds, He springs forth from stones, He breaks the ice of the Trasank, He is the Eternal Creator, Supporter, and Destroyer. He is the Power and the Light. If He has not blinded your eyes, ye people of Trawies, then behold Him, for He stands before you in all His glory! His body is the fire! Fire is the visible God!”

These words were like a refreshing shower, a mild

spring rain, upon the frozen hearts of the people. The flames soared silently heavenward, partially covering the dark figure standing behind them on the rock.

Wahnfred waited for the excited minds to become calm, then with uplifted arm he continued :

“ False prophets would tear our love and thankfulness to God from our hearts, by telling us that fire is of hell and belongs to the kingdom of the devil, and that it is the punishment of the wicked. Trawies killed one of these prophets, and so they have damned us, have endeavoured to imprison us within the ring of fire, not dreaming that with the flames they were surrounding us with the kingdom of God, wherein the poor and the unfortunate would be purified as by fire.

“ People of Trawies! You have misunderstood the heavenly mercy. There is a path bordered by roses, which leads to hell; the world chooses this; and there is a path which leads to hell through misery and sorrow; this you have trod. Where is Trawies? It stands between the earth and hell; for it has robbed, it has murdered, it has committed crimes and wrought destruction. If I should be asked to-day: ‘ Where is the valley of malefactors?’ I would, with tears in my eyes and with trembling hand, point at Trawies. May my eyes be blinded if my tears be not those of a mourning heart; may my arm be struck off if it be not outstretched to help you! The God of our fathers, Who has come down to us in the spark of ancestral fire that has been sacredly and faithfully guarded, where is He?

The fire guardian you have allowed to die in misery; you have desecrated his house, and when I ask you, where is the fire? what is your answer? You have pursued it, scorned it, and extinguished it, and now you expect it to protect you. You say that the world has taken God from you. This is false. You alone have banished our holy fire from the valley of the Trach. On a dark night, accompanied by a helpless child, it fled into the wilderness, as, according to the Holy Writ, the child Jesus fled before Herod. To a man living in solitude, who had prayed and kept alive the love of God in his heart, came the sacred light, the ancestral fire, and he received it. God's mercy was in the tiny spark, and he recognised it, preserved it, and worshipped it, and now he comes to you with the message that it still lives and is near you. Yes, people of Trawies, now I see your eyes brighten as though God were dwelling in you. But I say unto you, He is not yet with you! He, the Omnipresent One, does not dwell in hearts that are cold, without joy, without hope, without love. He does not make His abiding-place with mistrust, with fear, and with despair. For the moment, while you hear the scraping of the shovel with which an invisible hand is digging your graves, your passions are dulled. But I fear that the flame, which is consuming the breath of the pestilence above your heads, will not warm your degenerate hearts; for you have become a wicked people! It were a thousand times better, O most righteous God, that Thou shouldst destroy that which is not fit to live!"

“ No! ” cried a few voices; “ let us live; only let us live! ”

“ Only let us live! ” cried the entire assembly, and many knelt groaning before the fire and began to pray.

“ Now, you pray, ” continued Wahnfred, his voice growing clearer and more powerful; “ now that you have sinned, now that you have deserted your dead comrades, now that you have fled thirsting from your springs and no longer trust the air of your native forest, now, you pray! ”

They interrupted him, and, deeply stirred and shaken by his recent reference to the threatening danger, they implored for mercy, they swore that thenceforth they would live according to the will of God.

One among them, the emaciated Wend from the Gestade, rose and said: “ I also wish to live, but as long as I do not know what God requires of me, I will promise nothing. ”

To him Wahnfred replied: “ God wishes you to live as well as the others. Be like the fire, if you would be happy,—be warm, then you will be a comfort to yourself and to your comrades. ”

A comfort to one's self and to others! That sounded like a fairy tale of olden times.

“ It is not life alone that we wish, ” exclaimed a voice from the crowd; “ we care nothing for the others, we wish to be happy ourselves. To speak the truth, we are not so eager for God; what we desire is heaven! ”

“ Yes, ” cried many voices, “ it is heaven we desire! ”

“ Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” said Wahnfred, “ then heaven will come of itself.”

“ Shall we seek it amid war, hunger, and pestilence ?” asked Wend, scornfully.

“ What is war, hunger, and pestilence to us ?” cried Wahnfred, with an expression in his eyes which might have been taken for madness. “ Go, people of Trawies, return to your valley with peace in your hearts, and you will no longer fear the pestilence—it will soon be over. You will no longer hate, no longer deride, no longer weep; but your eyes will be opened; you have experienced what the earth can take from you, now you shall see what she can give you. You will not starve. You will plough your fields once more; hail-stones may fall upon them, but you will not perish. You will rebuild your houses; they may be destroyed, but you will not be roofless or homeless. You shall erect a temple to the Eternal Fire, you will come there to pray and shall find strength to endure. The wild brute within you, which is the origin of all evil, which nourishes all crime, and which grim death is pursuing with its sickle, this brute you must cast from you. Go down from this mountain as human beings once more, that you may find human beings in the valley below !”

“ Let us remain here on the mountain !” cried many voices.

“ What would you on the mountain ?” asked Wahnfred, descending from the rock.

“ Oh, stay up there and tell us more of God !” they implored.

“ You wish to hear again the voice of the preacher, the old familiar and long-missed tones. But I say unto you, God is not in words, God is in works, and to these I will now guide you.”

“ Then you will come with us ? ”

“ Not I with you, people of Trawies, but you with me. Woe to him,” shouted Wahnfred in powerful tones, while sparks seemed to fly from his darkening eyes, causing the eyelids of even the most savage in that company to quiver, “ woe to him who opposes me! God Almighty is with me. Arise, light the torches, and let us go.”

CHAPTER III

THE old chronicle tells us that Wahnfred now led the people down to the valley, where he endeavoured to restore order, industry, and unity. By the power of his words, by the fantastic symbols of his speech, by commands and threats, which seemed to produce an effect upon these disordered and excited natures, he succeeded in inducing them to bury the dead and to destroy the infected houses. He was always foremost in this work; he showed no fear in approaching the sick or in comforting the dying. He rested neither day nor night; he was friend, physician, and priest to everyone—and was not stricken himself.

He held a funeral service for the dead in the forest, lighting a great sacrificial fire, about which old penitential hymns were chanted. This increased the solemnity of death, but lessened its terrors.

Gradually the pestilence diminished, the cases grew less frequent, and at last the deaths from the plague ceased altogether.

Among those who had disappeared during this time was Little Baumhackel. Long afterwards, when the old, ruined church was reopened, a human

skeleton, supposed to be that of the Faun of Tra-wies, was found hanging to the bell-rope.

Life in the valley now seemed more peaceful, but it was only apparent. The people of the outlying regions were still far from pardoning this lawless folk, and whenever discord reigned without, the defiance and hate against the rabble in the forest was aroused anew. Once more, and for the last time,—Wahnfred sought to open negotiations for peace with the church authorities.

How could he even suggest such a thing! was the reproach with which the Trawiesers met this proposal. Did he not know that the heretics outside would straightway put an end to his teachings, together with the prophet and the parish? Now that they were standing on firm ground again with him at their side, and with their hope of heaven restored—to fall prostrate before the cross now? Not to be thought of!

A few of the people had begun to cultivate the fields, which for many years had served as grazing grounds for cattle, goats, and sheep, or else had run wild. But with the existing conditions no regular work was possible; they quarrelled over the boundary lines, over the land itself, and even over the men who worked it and over the seed that had been smuggled into the forest. There was no law here which seemed just to these people, and if perchance one happened to be discovered, either in some old statute-book or in the brain of some old man, only those obeyed it to whom it appealed. The others despised and cursed it. Wahnfred,

before whom they felt respect and a certain awe, could not always be present among them. Thus that oldest code of all—the right of might—was often adopted.

However, they clung earnestly, even passionately, to the new faith in the Fire God. The people's need for some form of religion is always great, but at that time when their ideals consisted mostly in the ceremonies of religious worship, it was much greater than now. Religious faith in those days was very closely allied to superstition, even to witchcraft. One followed the other. Both were the daily bread of the poor souls of that age. Those who had been cast out from the Church degenerated rapidly, or became victims of ideas which endangered their very existence; and those who had no God gave themselves up to the devil.

Wahnfred had known how to awaken a deep religious fanaticism in the people of Trawies, which was all the more intense because so long repressed. They now worshipped everything that was light, from the sun down to the glow-worm. At last they comprehended why fire was so comforting and so terrible. To the fire and to their adoration for it, they attributed the cessation of the pestilence. As they had formerly carried consecrated crosses and amulets concealed under their garments, so now they went about with tiny torches or burning tinder. As formerly they had knelt before their shrines, so now they knelt before their hearths, watching the fire and chanting old hymns. As formerly they had sprinkled themselves with holy water, so now they

held a spark over their heads and felt that they were blessed.

Some asked Wahnfred to allow them to light their hearth-fires with a spark from the ancestral fire; but this he refused, telling them that so long as they worshipped merely the symbol of God and did not change their lives in accordance, they were unworthy of the sacred relic.

In the hut on the Johannesberg, surrounded by the shadows of the forest, the little lamp shone unceasingly. Wahnfred guarded it and placed it in the greatest security, never allowing it to be extinguished. He defended it carefully against thieves; it was sheltered from every breath of wind; yet how easily a gnat might have fallen into the oil or a butterfly have extinguished the light with its wings! Wahnfred's lustrous eyes had been absorbing this spark until they seemed to see nothing on the earth or in the sky but fire. How long he had struggled to find a way in which to proclaim this mighty power to the people of Trawies! And now that he had found it and had proclaimed it, he himself was in its thrall. The legends and Gospels of the Bible were as though covered with a mist, surrounded by this blazing ring of flame. His soul had, like a moth, fluttered about it so constantly that it was suddenly caught and held.

In the meantime the people in the valleys of Trawies, who were trying to adapt themselves to their newly built huts, were going about with mean, craven hearts, sinning against themselves and others. Their penance for their sins

was to hold a finger over a flame until they writhed with pain.

In the spring, when the men should have been working in fields and gardens, they would be found lying about a fire which they had made on the edge of the forest and which seemed to be the only care they had in the world. In their quarrels they defended themselves with firebrands. If a man lost his life in one of these fights, according to the new law he was burned, not buried.

And these were not the worst people. The rabble still wandered about in the region as before; and their lives were a fire without warmth and their deeds were those of darkness.

In the Trasank valley an old woman had been caught who for a long time had borne the reputation of being a witch. It was Kofel, the herb-doctor and magic-healer. She prayed away disease, applied all kinds of mysterious remedies, and many had faith in her power to heal. But when the pestilence broke out and her arts proved worthless, and she was discovered performing various weird, uncanny rites, she became suspected. A shepherd from Traboden was the first to call her a witch. He was immediately taken ill and was now dying; thus the people were certain that she belonged to the devil.

Some defended her, saying: "Why should she not belong to the devil? That is what old women are meant for in this world. As all Trawies belongs to the devil, why should she not boldly practise her arts?" And they went to her for instruction in these arts. This she refused, telling

them that she would carry her secrets with her to the grave.

But since the new faith had been adopted and the people once more had a God, they considered it their duty to oppose the devil. The old woman still clung to her magic, reviling the new faith as a heresy. They finally pursued her, took her prisoner, and dragged her to Trawies, where they had planned to burn her to death. They were already assembled to see the spectacle, carrying wood and vying with one another to build the pyre as high as possible, while the little woman, gagged and deathly pale, was cowering under a tree, staring with horrified eyes at the busy crowd. Just at this moment Wahnfred arrived. At first he thought they were building a house and he rejoiced at the enterprise of his Trawiesers. But as he saw what was about to take place, he was filled with anger and cried:

“Have you gone mad? You call old Kofel a witch, and you would throw her into the arms of God! Would you desecrate your fire? Let her go; if she belongs to the devil, he will take care of her.”

They comprehended, freed the woman, and offered penitential prayers before the fire.

Wahnfred had been trying to devise means to keep the people occupied, to impose upon them some compulsory service which should hold them within bounds. Their delusion should aid him in this and at the same time be their master. As he saw them building the funeral pyre, the thought occurred to him: a temple.

They should erect a temple to their Fire God, a

building such as these mountains had never seen before, a solid, massive structure, made of logs from the primeval forest; a fortress for the priest, a refuge for the parish, the heart of the new Trawies. But it must not stand in the valley, to be dominated by the mountains or where it might be destroyed by torrents. It mattered little if the old Trawies, with its church, should fall in ruins, or if a wilderness should grow up about the Dreiwand. The new place of worship must stand upon the heights and gleam in the sun like a flaming table of laws.

A flaming table of laws! Could the brain of the stern man, Wahnfred, be already conceiving the idea, as he was planning the temple, of what was one day to take place upon the Johannesberg? Filled with the desire to wrest Trawies from its misery, to elevate it, strengthen it, and bring it once more into harmony with human society, he ascended the mountain. On the summit was a small rocky plateau, which on three sides fell abruptly to the valley. Upon this spot he drew with his stick the ground plan of the new temple.

CHAPTER IV

WITH an inquiring look you turn to the narrator of these events—asking him by what paths he must now lead you.

It is late in the night and we see two little flames flickering before us. They are the signs of the God-seekers, the seekers for heaven, and these shall be our guides. The fire prophet we know to be on the Johannesberg. But there is another, who is seeking his God and his heaven in a different fire—in the warmth of a loving heart.

Wahnfred's son, who upon the deserts of solitude had been overcome by the passion of youth, the life-loving, love-needy Erlefried—what had become of him?

Since that night when, led by the sound of a voice, he had climbed the steep precipice of the Torstein, at the foot of which the conflagration was beginning, Erlefried had not been seen again. The one person who had been with him did not see him, for she was blind.

Bertha, the young prisoner in the cave, had many times searched for an exit by which she might escape; but she was unable to find her way through the labyrinths and grottos, and was always glad to

return, guided by the reflection of her little lamp, and to sink exhausted on her soft white couch. She had ceased thinking and wondering why she was in this place; she no longer believed what she said and felt, but took everything for an illusion of the senses, and she had become accustomed to the idea of madness.

“Thou foolish Bertha,” she often said to herself, “why dost thou torment thyself? Thou art ill. This is the Johannesberg, and this is your house and your room, and it is not the dreadful man, it is thy good mother who makes thy bed and braids thy hair. Thou must not be offended, mother, that I am so rude to thee, for I am ill and my mind is haunted by terrible visions. If only I could get the idea of this cave out of my head and if only this strange man were not always about me; he grins so horribly and declares that he is the devil, and I am sure he is right. Thou must not weep, mother; I will close my eyes and shut out the terrible sights.”

On the day when the forest began to burn, her uncanny host did not come as usual, and, growing hungry, she made one more attempt to find an exit. She wandered about in the dark passages, she climbed, she crawled, and where the path seemed to end she frantically tore away the loose stones, as if she would penetrate into the very heart of the mountain, when suddenly the wall crumbled and fell and a dazzling light met her eyes. But only one brief flash; the same moment that showed her the light of day again plunged her into eternal night. The nerves of the eyes, weakened by their

long confinement in darkness, were destroyed. She realised that her surroundings were very different from what they had been; she felt the light, she breathed the pure air, she was free at last—yet she could not see. It was no longer the darkness of the cavern, with its shadows and the dim reflection of the lamp, in which she had lived for so many months, it was the grey of an impenetrable mist wherein bright stars circled, repeating the sudden flash of light in many different forms, until gradually even that disappeared and there was nothing but endless grey.

Bertha clung to the rocks, feeling her way along the precipice and screaming for help. This was the cry that Erlefried had heard from the Devil's Stone.

He thought it must be Sela, who had left him a short time before, and he was therefore greatly surprised to see, high up on the precipice, this strange, pale, poorly clad girl. When she heard his footsteps she called no longer, but cowered motionless.

Night had already fallen and the stars were shining. But Erlefried had no time to look at the sky. He was straining every nerve to reach the poor, helpless creature above him. He was not long in discovering what a hopelessly wretched being had sunk into his arms. She was worn and thin, blind, and her mind was wandering.

She wept as she felt his warm young hand; she clung to the slender, supple body; she prayed aloud and spoke of things which he did not understand.

With difficulty he led her down the desolate path to the valley. As they stood beside the bank of the

brook and he was gazing into the dry sand searching for water with which to revive her, he saw a red glow of light on the cliff of the Torstein,—a light that was to gleam there for many days and nights,—he saw the dark circling cloud of smoke soaring into the sky, and he realised that he must flee. Supporting the girl on his arm he hastened forward, the rapidly growing flames throwing bands of light across their path. When they reached a denser part of the forest the young man gently laid his burden upon the moss.

Motionless, breathless, she lay there. Had she fainted? Was she dead? He knelt before this woman, but where was his passionate desire for a kiss, with which Sela had inspired him? He was as cold as ice. Then another warmth arose within him and tears gathered in his eyes. He bent over this prostrate form, not seeking a kiss at the woman's lips, but listening to her breathing for a sign of life.

She still breathed. Breaking boughs from an alder-bush he wrapped them about the slumbering girl. He laid himself upon the ground a short distance away from her and watched, wondering by whom he was watching, what it all meant, and what would come of it. "This is the devil's game," he thought; "he may keep his word, yet is he false withal, and now he is mocking me. I did not sell my soul for such a reward as this pitiful creature lying here, clad in beggar's garments. Give it back to me, dog of hell; give me back my soul!"

The girl groaned in her sleep. Erlefried longed

to pray but could not. He succeeded in stammering the words of his evening prayer, but where were his thoughts? With the devil. The prayer was dead, without soul—his soul he had sold to another. Cold drops of sweat stood upon his forehead and a shudder passed over him.

Then Erlefried turned upon his side, and in the depths of his heart he declared to himself that the sly Satan should not have him: "Thou hast deceived me and I will deceive thee. I am not yet thine, and I shall not be until a new moon falls upon a Corpus Christi Day in Trawies. So, good-night, and leave me in peace."

Why should he have had an evil conscience? The young man had committed no sin, and he soon sank into a sound, healthy sleep.

For hours they lay there undisturbed, then Erlefried was suddenly wakened by a curious crackling, roaring sound. He sprang to his feet, and made the horrible discovery that they were surrounded by a sea of flame—the fire was upon them. There was barely time to waken the girl; but to reflect whether or not he should leave this devil's game to its own fate and flee alone, for that there was no time. Thinking of neither God nor the devil, he dragged the staggering girl after him, for sparks were already flying over their heads.

They escaped from the flames but not from danger. For days they wandered about without rest, without plan. Hunger by day and cold by night were their companions. Erlefried now recognised in this girl nothing but a sick, miserable creature whom he

could not desert. But where should he take her? He dared not show himself in Trawies, and he also knew that he would find no succour there. Should he return to Bart's house? Bart and Sela would ask him where he had found his companion. Could he trust himself to reply? Would it not stand written on his forehead, as it was written in blood upon the stone in the wilderness, to what depths he had fallen? He could not look his beloved in the eye, he could not re-enter his foster-father's house. Should he go on wandering through the forest, nourishing his companion and himself with wild fruits? The forest was burning and every living thing was fleeing from it. Should he cross the ring of flame at the boundary and thenceforth lead a beggar's life? This seemed to be the only course left him, yet he could not desert this girl who had fallen into his hands in such a remarkable way. That she was a heavy burden, he did not deny.

One day she asked Erlefried who he was.

"My name is Erlefried, and I am the son of Wahnfred, the carpenter," answered the young man quickly, pleased to have her talk.

"The carpenter from the Gestade?" she murmured thoughtfully; "why, he is the man who murdered the priest! And thou art his son Erlefried?"

"I am he."

"Art thou really he?" She passed her hand over his face and hands, repeating: "Art thou really he?"

"Yes; why should I not be?"

Then she answered: "I suspected that I was dead."

"What?" he replied; "thou art alive!"

"Yes, I know; I live, like thyself, in the other world."

For hours she was silent and allowed him to lead her. He was now convinced that she had lost her mind and his pity for her increased.

They had at last taken refuge in a deserted shepherd's hut, and the young man had gathered blackberries, whortleberries, and other wild fruits which he understood preparing as food.

As Bertha felt the warmth of the fire, she began to weep. When he gently asked her the cause, she answered that she was thinking of her mother.

"We must meet her soon," she said, "for she has been here a long time. If thou shouldst see her, take me to her."

After a while she asked: "Dost thou know what has become of thy father?"

"He lives on the Johannesberg."

"He does!" cried the girl, straightening herself erect; "then it is he who killed my mother! She used to live on the Johannesberg. Oh, you are all murderers! Erlefried, go away and leave me alone! Am I then damned that I must be with thee?"

Once while she was eating, she suddenly laughed aloud and said: "It is curious that so many things here are the same as on earth. Art thou also hungry? Dost thou still wish to eat and drink? Strange, and thou hast been dead so long!"

"Who told thee that I was dead?"

“The Trawiesers said that robbers had killed thee at Bart-from-Tärn’s.”

Now at last he comprehended a portion of her singular words. Gradually the poor girl opened her whole heart to him. She was under the delusion that she was in purgatory, and he was unable to dispel the idea.

On one occasion she inhaled a deep breath, at the same time feeling in the air with her hands, and murmuring: “Yes, it seems like sweet life once more: if I only knew whether or not I had death before me!”

Erlefried knew. But he did not know whether she would be glad or sorry to hear the truth. And we none of us know whether it is better to have death behind or before us.

“Thou must be young and handsome,” she whispered once. “I should like to know if in this other world it is also a sin to love.”

“It would be sad indeed, if one could not love,” remarked the lad, playing with the embers; “it is neither a sin—nor a pleasure.”

“Surely thou hast had a sweetheart on earth!” she said.

“Child, I have her yet,” he replied, “and I shall always have her.”

Then she ceased speaking and wept the entire night. It was nearly morning before she became quiet and Erlefried, whose sensations were of the most painful description, was at last able to sleep.

When he woke the sun was shining directly upon him through the open doorway. It was broad day-

light, and how changed was the aspect of everything from that of the darkness of the night! All anxiety was gone, all sadness had disappeared.

The blind girl's couch was empty. Had she felt her way out and was she sitting on the stone to forget her sorrow in the brightness of the morning? Erlefried rose and left the hut. But he did not find her. In the dewy grass he followed the tracks of footsteps, which led in an irregular zigzag away among the trees and finally ended at the edge of a steep precipice.

In the abyss below she lay—upon the bloody stones.

No one knew how the unfortunate Bertha had come to her death. Had she sought it? If so, her reason must have returned to her that morning, for in her delusion she was already in the other world. Had she, the blind girl, fled from Erlefried because she hated or because she—loved him?

He longed to flee as far as his feet would carry him; it was all so weird, so dismal. When he touched her and found that she was stiff and cold, he could not look at her face again. Breaking off a few fir-boughs—for here in the Birstling the trees were still alive—he covered the body until nothing was visible in the rocky gorge but a mound of green. Then he collected stones and rocks as large as he could carry, and built a wall about the mound, upon which he heaped more stones. After he had worked three days, a huge pile stood there, reaching far above his shoulders. This was poor Bertha's burial. It was the best Erlefried could do for her,

for he had neither spade nor pickaxe with which to dig a grave.

When all was finished, as a sign that he considered neither the blind girl nor himself as lost he laid a wooden cross upon the pyramid, before which he knelt in prayer. Fear had taken up its abode in his heart since that night when he had seen the drops of blood flowing over the grey stone; but the cross was still his refuge and his hope.

Then Erlefried left the burial-place in the Birstling forest and never returned to it. The youngest trees which were then sprouting there are to-day old, mouldering trunks, but under the cliff may still be seen a mound of stones, overgrown with grass and vines, beneath which lies buried the most unfortunate and the most innocent sacrifice of ruined Trawies.

CHAPTER V

ERLEFRIED continued his wandering through the forest. He had at last passed the burned district, and the people whom he met told him with frightened faces that the condition of Trawies was more hopeless than ever. And for the first time he heard of the pestilence.

He asked if the disease had reached the mountain and the house of Bart-from-Tärn.

Bart's house stood empty, was the reply, and the inhabitants had fled.

Thus the last bond was broken. Erlefried sprang over the boundary line, so long known as the ring of fire, walked calmly past the gallows which stood before the entrance to the various villages and castles, stopping at several houses to inquire the way and to seek for information concerning Trawies, whither, according to his statement, he was now bound.

What did he want in Trawies ? they asked.

In reply, he related that he was a native of the place, but that when very young he had been taken by a cousin of his, a priest, to Neukloster, where he had lived as lay-brother. He had recently heard much that made him grieve for his unfortunate

native village—although he could hardly believe that the Trawiesers had become so inhuman as reported—and it was his intention to go there to investigate matters, and he hoped to be the means of saving what was still to be saved.

Everyone counselled him against such an undertaking. Trawies was a nest of robbers and murderers, and the only thing to be done was to see that none of the inhabitants escaped and to allow things to take their course until the rabble had at last destroyed themselves. And perhaps a still greater Power would annihilate this godless people sooner than was expected.

With apparent reluctance the clever young man gave up his plan for pressing on to Trawies, and although feigning to go in that direction, in reality he advanced into the country outside, the danger of his being recognised as a Trawieser diminishing with each day.

At last he reached the plains, and the mountains of his forest-land had become only distant blue peaks. On a large dairy-farm he found a situation to work, and here he passed the winter, leading a regular, industrious life.

How often he thought of Sela! He sometimes wondered if others had the same experience as himself, for only when his sorrow was banished from his heart, when he felt content and happy, could he think with passionate longing of the girl he loved. Whenever he thought of his compact at the Devil's Stone, Sela's picture was blotted from his memory.

The master was well pleased with the active, in-

dustrious young man, but the latter was not pleased with himself. There was a feeling of unrest within him as if the devil had really taken up his abode in his heart. Not until the preceding autumn had he felt that God was lost—for Trawies, or for himself. All his evil passions were aroused; he no longer sought to control them, for he knew to whom he had sold himself. During the day he would be filled with terror, and at night he would often start suddenly from his sleep, as if a cold hand had been laid upon his breast.

The sweet dreams of his childhood at the Gestade, of his merry games, wherein he had discovered a new world of his own, of his mother, who had guided him like an angel, of his father, in whose religious talks he had seen the heavens open and God enthroned in His majesty—these dreams which had formerly visited him every night, bringing back to the banished son of a banished father a memory of that golden time, had not come to him since that day, when, in the intoxication of passion, he had written his name upon the grey stone. The past was for him a lost paradise. Quite a different companion now appeared at his bedside. It was old Roderich with his piercing eyes. Instead of hands he had claws with which he was raking burning coals over a grey stone, from out which trickled drops of blood. Then with a grin the old man would whisper evil words in his ear and would scatter sparks upon his limbs, until the sleeper shuddered and awoke.

One day as he was lying face downwards upon

the summit of a mountain he heard a loud voice crying: "Do what thou wilt, thou art mine!"

The people with whom he lived all liked the quiet, handsome, agreeable young man; but there were two children in the family who avoided him and were afraid of him. They realised that his cheerfulness was feigned, that his games with them were without heart. They would frequently notice him staring absently into space or he would burst into a harsh laugh, or suddenly turn pale—he was too unnatural for them.

When the household were praying aloud at table or in the evening, their voices harmonising like the sound of bells, his voice was muffled or overloud and his fingers twitched convulsively. Every time he left the church he was more melancholy than when he entered it. At first the sound of the bell and the tones of the organ and the soft glimmer of candles amid the rising incense comforted him greatly. He felt as though newly born and newly baptised. But when he knelt before the holy altar and the priest laid the sacred wafer upon his tongue, everything grew black before his eyes, he covered his face with his hands, and, staggering back, murmured: "Now I have tasted death!"

On Easter Sunday he listened to a sermon on the dead and buried Saviour. "Ye wicked men who have killed and buried Him with your sins, ye leave the holy sepulchre to return to your worldly pleasures. But ye shall wander without happiness amongst the pleasures of the earth, ye shall hunger and thirst and not be satisfied, ye shall consume

yourselves, ye shall be lost and damned! Happy they who return to the quiet grave of their Saviour before it is too late. Their tears of repentance shall fall melodiously upon the rocky sepulchre and waken the Holiest, Who will rise and bestow His love and mercy upon the children of this earth. Therefore, thou poor, godless, lost sinner, to-day, on this glorious day of victory, turn in thy path, come back and seek thy God where thou hast lost Him."

These words of the preacher made a deep impression upon the mind of the dreamy youth and he determined to return to Trawies. He felt that he, too, had a share in the sins of his native parish and that he was a faithless wretch to flee cowardly from his penance. Still dominated by the idea that he belonged to the evil one, he now resolved to struggle to escape from him and to erase the name which he had written upon the Devil's Stone.

And, besides, this child of the mountains was seized with homesickness, that demoniacal power which has drawn others from better regions back to the sorrows and miseries of home. At last a longing for Bart's house in the Tärn and its inhabitants, a longing for Sela, his dear deserted Sela, overcame him. She must pardon him, she was his angel; in her arms would he take refuge.

Erlefried then went to his master and said: "I thank you for the kindness which has been shown me in your house. Now I must go away."

"I understand," answered the peasant; "but you will stay with me until the wedding."

“ Until what wedding ? ”

“ So you do not acknowledge it even yet ? I should have been pleased, Erlefried, had you considered me worthy of your confidence, instead of obliging me to learn of your affairs from others. That is the way with you young people, you think you are keeping a secret when the whole valley knows it. *Mein Gott!* you have done well to get ahead of all the rest, you have done well ! That is probably because you were educated in a monastery. *Donnerwetter!* young man, why do you stand there like that ? Well, I wish you happiness; you are young, you are good, quite good enough for her.”

Erlefried understood at last, although it was with some difficulty that he comprehended what lay behind it all. Neighbour Erhart had a daughter, called Beautiful Trull, the peasant's only child and of marriageable age. But she was proud ! She belonged to the class of women who will go to great lengths to break a man's heart. She understood attracting them and then she would suddenly deluge them with her scorn, which was like an ice-cold waterfall. When at last no more victims fell into her snares, she declared there were no men in this region who pleased her. Since Erlefried's arrival she had ceased to say this. She had followed him in such a marked manner that everybody was noticing it, with one exception: Erlefried himself.

And when it was told him in so many words that Beautiful Trull loved him and wished to marry him, a strange joy filled his heart and, hardly aware of

what he was doing, he hastened to Erhart's house and asked to see Trull.

Erhart was an elderly man and he received Erlefried warmly. He could not say enough to show how glad he was that the young man from his neighbour's, of whom he had heard so much good, had at last found the way to his house. Oh, it was Trull he wished to see; she would be most happy, she was in the next room, he might go in at once. Trull was no longer of that age when young girls blush unconsciously whenever a young man enters. She blushed consciously, but none the less becomingly. She also cast down her eyes—and she was beautiful indeed. If Erlefried had really been possessed of the devil, he would have been unable to carry out the idea with which he entered the room. But, remembering his previous resolve just in time, he said: "A report is being circulated among the people, my dear Jungfrau Trull, and if it should be true that you care for me, I must indeed be very happy. And I have to thank you, my most worthy and beautiful Jungfrau, for your favour and for holding such a man as myself, who has nothing good about him, worthy of notice. And especially such a man as myself must feel a deep gratitude and I do not know how to thank you. However, I can offer you nothing better than an honest answer. I wish I might be the right one for you and thus pay my indebtedness—but my heart is no longer my own."

The last words were spoken sorrowfully, and one could not tell whether he was thinking of Sela or of the grey stone in the Tärn,

Beautiful Trull rose quickly and said: "What is that to me? You are only a stranger and have no right to speak thus to me. I will call my father if you do not leave me instantly!"

Old Erhart did not know what to think when he saw Erlefried taking a silent leave. And beautiful Trull! The chronicler has failed to describe her sufferings.

CHAPTER VI

SO Erlefried set out on his journey. For a while he was tormented by the thought that he had thrown away a chance for a prosperous future in this flat, sunny, fertile land, and he knew that he was returning to a life of sorrow and suffering. He went, nevertheless; feeling drawn thither, he hastened faster and faster towards his unhappy home. He no longer asked advice concerning the way. Trembling inwardly he learned of the terrible black death at Trawies, but he went steadily forward. Sadly and scornfully the streams flowed out to meet him from the mountains; the peaks were still gleaming with their snowy caps, and over all stretched the endless blue, broken here and there by light, fleecy clouds. Above the wanderer's head the swallows were flying homeward, like himself, towards the wooded hills.

Yonder in the distance was a broad plain, where no tree was standing; only here and there a charred trunk towered aloft in a manner ghastly to behold. This was the Tärn. Even the cross that had stood upon the lonely heights long after the destruction of the forest had succumbed to the storms of the preceding winter, which had thrown it upon the

ground—this last relic of the Christian parish that had once led a peaceful life among these mountains. Erlefried wandered many days and nights; the days were beautiful, for it was the month of May; the nights were dark, for it was nearing the time for a new moon.

When he reached the boundary, he stopped and gave one last look out at the wide world; he still belonged to it, was still free. He felt like a suicide standing at the brink of a precipice; he looked once more at the sunlight; once more he cried: "I can do nothing else!" and he made the plunge.

When he had leapt over the boundary line of Trawies, a cry burst from his lips, but it was a cry of joy. He stamped with his foot upon the ground—this was good, firm earth! His blood flowed more freely in his veins. That anxious feeling of being lost had gone; here the evil one would no longer be slyly watching for him and surprising him in his sleep; here in the abiding-place of the devil, Erlefried might boldly walk up and meet him, and that would be far better. There was a chance for peace now, for Corpus Christi would not be celebrated in Trawies for some time yet! And should it never be celebrated, was not Wahnfred striking out in new paths to lead Trawies to heaven? And could not his son Erlefried do the same? He would join his father, and the new way to God should no longer lead past Good Friday and All Souls' Day.

Erlefried now descended from the mountain-ridge called Scharfeck towards the narrow valley of Trawies. At his right towered the Birstling,

clothed with its dark pine-forests and luxuriant growth of hazel, and at his left stretched the grey, mouldering plain of the Tärn.

In the narrow pass where the Dürbach gushed a group of men were working. Men working in Tra-wies! That was a good sign. They were clearing away an old, disused road. They pushed the larger stones to one side, the small ones they crushed with iron mallets, then, after scattering earth over them, they covered all with moss and turf. They toiled industriously, and at a little distance away where the narrow gorge ended and the precipice rose abruptly they were building a table out of stones.

One of the men had stolen into the woods and stretched himself upon his back in the shade. Erlefried approached him. The idle man rose at once, but Erlefried told him not to disturb himself, he only wished to inquire what they meant by building such a good road in this wild gorge.

“ You do not live here ? ” asked the man.

“ I come from outside. ”

“ You do, do you? Then I suppose you really ought to be killed. If any of us should go away that would happen. But of late we have had deaths enough. It is no longer any laughing matter. I should like something to eat if you 've got anything with you, and I 'd advise you to give it of your own accord! ”

Erlefried shared with him the bread which he had in his bag.

“ Ah! ” said the man, swallowing the bits whole, “ if we could only have such bread as this again! ”

“ If you work as I see you are now doing, you are on the right road to it,” answered Erlefried.

“ Ha, ha!” laughed the other; “ from him who gives us the work I do not hope much. Do you know, unknown prince, for whom we are making this road? You cannot guess? Think as hard as you will, but it would not be worth your trouble. The most absurd thing about it all is that the one for whom we are making it will never walk here.”

“ Will he be driven?”

“ He’s a very lazy gentleman and has to be carried! And he eats, eats all the time, never stops eating. He could not live for one second, I tell you, if he were not constantly fed.”

“ What kind of a strange animal can that be?”

“ It is no animal, young man; when you know him you will have respect for him. I will tell you: it is the new God. Yes, child, it is the new, the fiery Lord God. He has been given to us only lately. Well, one really does not know whether to laugh or to cry over it.”

Erlefried had already heard that the people of Trawies had become fire-worshippers. At first he was horrified at the news, but, on reflecting, he had thought: “ Why not then? If we must have a visible symbol, one is as good as another. Yes, one may be better than another. Water would have answered also.”

“ The old faith proved worthless,” remarked the man; “ the fire that used to be in hell we put into heaven now. It is much better so. We will make

our hell as we need it; no one likes to be burned. He's quite right, our carpenter, and soon, I hope, he will break off the devil's horns also, so that he cannot run them into us."

"I should not mind if he did," thought Erlefried, "but from present appearances the devil will have no power over me for some time to come."

"You have eaten my bread," he said, "but you have not yet told me how your new God is going to use this road."

"Can you not guess?" cried the man. "Considering that you come from outside, you do not seem to me very pious. Do you not celebrate Corpus Christi to-morrow? I think you do, and we in here celebrate it also. That is why we must have a God, that we may go on keeping our holidays and festivals. But we do it at night, for our God is not bright enough by day. We are to hold our festival to-night. This year it falls very fortunately, for Corpus Christi eve will be as black as coal, with no moonlight. A processional is customary, so we shall carry our new God through the mountain gorges and set him up on the stone table,—the lazy rascals have n't finished it yet,—and there we shall set fire to him, until he burns like the devil. The women will chant and it will all be most interesting. You will come, of course?"

Poor Erlefried!—new moon on Corpus Christi, in Trawies, and this very night!

"No!" he cried; "that is a pagan custom, that must not be!"

The man looked at the excited youth with a

twinkle in his eye and murmured: "Oh, you little scrap of humanity, what would you have us do?"

"I am lost!" cried Erlefried, throwing himself upon the ground. Before his soul stood the horrible vision which in that dark age was so superstitiously nurtured in mankind. He writhed upon the ground and groaned until even the lazy workman was startled.

"What has happened to you all of a sudden?" he asked; "one would almost think you had the pest!"

"The pest!" said Erlefried. "Good man, if it were only that, how thankful I should be to my God!"

"*O Jesu Christ!* Can it be worse than that?"

"It is the eternal pest, the hellish pest! Let me go, let me go, you cannot help me."

But the other held him fast by the arm, muttering between his teeth: "I will not let you go until you have told me the meaning of all this."

"Well, I will tell you," said Erlefried, wiping the drops from his forehead with his coat-sleeve; "it is no secret, and it is connected with your festival. To-night the devil will take me."

The other laughed aloud, considering the words merely as a common phrase. But Erlefried soon explained. He told his curious and sympathetic listener how he had written his name with blood upon the Devil's Stone, how he had received frequent nightly visits from the evil one, and how he had sworn by the grey stone that whenever a new moon and Corpus Christi fell upon the same day in Trawies the devil might have him for his own.

The other folded his hands across his knees and said with a shake of the head: "That is bad, very bad!"

"Do you suppose," continued Erlefried, "that the people of Trawies on my account and for brotherly love would give up their procession?"

At this the man shouted with laughter, saying: "One can see very plainly where you come from. If the people find out that there is to be an extra show, they will be all the more determined to have their procession. A thing like that would make it all the merrier."

"You cannot advise me, then, what to do?" asked the young man, turning away.

"Not very well, but I will think it over——"

"Leave off your thinking," said Erlefried excitedly; "you have nothing further to do with it."

"That you are not in a very good temper, young man, I can well believe, but you must not slight the words of a friend. And since I know that the devil is going to take you, I am your friend. We two lying here under the hazel-bushes, we ought to be able to outwit the devil. Surely, one so young as you should have a few drops of superfluous blood."

"What do you mean?" asked Erlefried, with a gesture of despair.

"I know of a remedy. You say you wrote your name on the Devil's Stone with blood? I don't ask why that troubles you now, but I know that if the signature is to be made null and void, it must be washed out with blood."

"Can that be true?" asked Erlefried anxiously.

“ I have heard it a hundred times, and it is also thus in the story of the robber chief. He is said to have had a box full of knives, with each one of which he had killed a man. When the day arrived for the devil to take him, he took one knife after the other and with each cut off a piece of his own body until at last he fell dead. In this same moment a white dove flew out of his heart up towards heaven, leaving the devil nothing but the empty body. You, my young gentleman, do not look as if you had sent many people out of the world,—rather the contrary,—so you ’ll not need to cut off much flesh to pay your debt. Take off one finger, that will be enough.”

“ I know what I will do,” said Erlefried, rising and walking away.

Thoughts were formed rapidly in this fantastic brain. To save his soul was to him of the greatest importance. Even if this world were lost, he would at least find his Sela in the next. Here below he must never see her again. Self-redemption from the bonds of sin! That was now his creed, his way to heaven. He hastened through the forest, he hastened up the barren mountain, he hastened to the stone where he had written his name.

He would erase it with his own blood.

CHAPTER VII

IN an isolated part of the forest still lies the Devil's Stone. It resembles a little hut, with its rounded corners and weather-beaten top. It could not have grown out of the ground, or have been laid bare by the gradual disappearance of the earth, as is so often said of stones. It seemed rather to be growing into the ground, as if, according to a saying of the people, "It should, for very shame, sink nine fathoms deep."

And there may be good reason for this saying, for it accords with the repute in which the stone is held. In the Alps one frequently meets with the legend that the devil, whose wings were too short to fly up to heaven, attempted to build a ladder from the earth to the kingdom of God, that he might take possession of the latter. In this region the following version of the legend is extant: Upon the summit of the Trasank the Prince of Darkness collected his building material from far and wide, but when his ladder reached the sky, he found it so securely arched, and the sun and stars so dazzling, that he was obliged to abandon his undertaking. Angered by his failure, he struck a tremendous blow with his fist upon the ladder, sending the

bits flying in all directions. One of the stones fell into the Trawies woods and was thenceforth called the "Devil's Stone."

For centuries it had been covered with moss, but at the time of the ban this had been scraped off and the plant life in the grooves destroyed until the surface was smooth. Soon innumerable strange signs and words, written in a dark red colour, appeared upon it, traces of which may be seen to this day.

And it was to this stone that Erlefried was now hastening, as he had done just one year before.

In the forest, twilight was already falling and soft, misty clouds floated in the sky. A still, solemn atmosphere lay over all, and not a breath of wind stirred the leaves in the trees.

Erlefried was leaning against an old, fissured tree-trunk, gazing out into the distance. He saw the peak of the Johannesberg, at the foot of which lay his dear Gestade. He saw the cliffs of the Trasank, where when a boy he had climbed nimbly and gaily as a chamois. In that narrow basin lay little Trawies, where he had once listened to the holy Word of God and to the sound of bells and to the tones of the organ. All gone! Yonder he saw the heights where Bart's house stood, and in the foreground towered the bare peak, formerly surmounted by the cross, whither he and Sela had made their pilgrimage in the preceding autumn.

"Oh could I but have my life once more, my beloved life!" he sobbed, covering his face. "I would willingly bear again all the suffering from the Gestade, where I lived as a child, up to the cross in the

Tärn. I would bear it all again. I have been so happy. O my Eternal God, let me but begin my life anew! The second time I will find the right way. Below they are assembling to worship Thee in the fire. If Thou art that fire which consumed the miraculous bird, that rose from the ashes as Phoenix, in all the renewed glory of its youth, then I will pray with them! I have no desire to become dust. O most Holy God, I would not yet enter the unknown land; I long to live!"

There was no answer and the evening shadows were fast closing about him.

Erlefried braced himself for the effort, saying: "There is no turning back and no choice; it must be!"

He took a few steps forward and stood before the stone.

He started. A human form was sitting upon it. It was a man with flaxen hair which fell in long locks from under a white woollen cap. His face was narrow and his features sharp. His lips were pursed as though he were smiling to himself, and his bare feet—his linen trousers were rolled up to his knees—were dangling over the stone. His appearance indicated that he was a shepherd.

Erlefried stepped behind a tree waiting for him to go away. But he remained sitting, humming one song after another and swaying his feet to and fro.

The fateful night was drawing near and all was dark. There was no time to be lost, and how often had Erlefried heard that the devil was always prompt. What if it should be he sitting yonder on

the stone waiting for him! He was known to frequently take the guise of hunters and shepherds.

The man then began humming:

“ Dearest friend, I ask of thee.”

“ Dearest friend, what ask'st thou me ? ”

“ Tell me, what is one ? ”

“ One and one is God alone,
Who rules above and works below,
In heaven and on the earth.”

Erlefried breathed more freely. That was not the devil. He walked over to the shepherd and said: “ What are you doing here ? ”

“ I am singing my evening prayer,” and he continued:

“ Dearest friend, I ask of thee.”

“ Dearest friend, what ask'st thou me ? ”

“ Tell me, what is two ? ”

“ Two tables of Moses,
One and one is God alone,
Who rules above and works below,
In heaven and on the earth.”

“ You cannot be one of the fire-worshippers, for you are still singing that old hymn,” said Erlefried.

“ Oh yes, oh yes,” answered the shepherd. “ I take everything as it comes, believing a double faith to be better than a single one. But there should be two for this song. Can you help me ? ”

Erlefried had learned it from his mother, and it reminded him of home. She had told him that this hymn was so sacred that the stars stood still and

gleamed like altar candles in the sky when it was sung upon the earth.

So in this dark hour nothing could have been more welcome to the young man than this song.

“Begin,” said he, “I will follow.” The shepherd continued:

“Dearest friend, I ask of thee.”

Erlefried replied: “Dearest friend, what ask’st thou me?”

The shepherd: “Tell me, what is three?”

Erlefried: “Three patriarchs.”

Both together: “Three patriarchs, two tables of Moses,

One and one is God alone,
Who rules above and works below,
In heaven and on the earth.”

The shepherd: “Dearest friend, I ask of thee.”

Erlefried: “Dearest friend, what ask’st thou me?”

The shepherd: “Tell me, what is four?”

Erlefried: “Four evangelists.”

Both: “Four evangelists, three patriarchs,”
etc.

The shepherd: “Dearest friend, I ask of thee.”

Erlefried: “Dearest friend, what ask’st thou me?”

The shepherd: “Tell me, what is five?”

Erlefried: “Five wounds of Christ.”

Both: “Five wounds of Christ, four evangelists,” etc.

The shepherd: “Dearest friend, I ask of thee.”

Erlefried: “Dearest friend, what ask’st thou me?”

- The shepherd : " Tell me, what is six ? "
- Erlefried : " Six stone water-pots."
- Both : " Six stone water-pots, five wounds of Christ," etc.
- The shepherd : " Dearest friend, I ask of thee."
- Erlefried : " Dearest friend, what ask'st thou me ? "
- The shepherd : " Tell me, what is seven ? "
- Erlefried : " Seven sacraments."
- Both : " Seven sacraments, six stone water-pots," etc.
- The shepherd : " Dearest friend, I ask of thee."
- Erlefried : " Dearest friend, what ask'st thou me ? "
- The shepherd : " Tell me, what is eight."
- Erlefried : " Eight beatitudes."
- Both : " Eight beatitudes, seven sacraments," etc.
- The shepherd : " Dearest friend, I ask of thee."
- Erlefried : " Dearest friend, what ask'st thou me ? "
- The shepherd : " Tell me, what is nine ? "
- Erlefried : " Nine choirs of angels."
- Both : " Nine choirs of angels, eight beatitudes," etc.
- The shepherd : " Dearest friend, I ask of thee."
- Erlefried : " Dearest friend, what ask'st thou me ? "
- The shepherd : " Tell me, what is ten ? "
- Erlefried : " Ten commandments of God."
- Both : " Ten commandments of God, nine choirs of angels, eight beatitudes, seven sacraments, six stone water-pots, five wounds

of Christ, four evangelists, three patriarchs, two tables of Moses, one and one is God alone, Who rules above and works below, in heaven and on the earth."

Reverently and solemnly they sang the quaint old hymn. A few stars were already shining in the sky.

"Now," said the shepherd, "you will not need to say your evening prayers later on. But you must be very pious, for your eyes were wet while you were singing."

"Good friend," answered Erlefried, "if you knew how I felt, you would not wonder at the tears in my eyes. Ask no questions and go: you are in my way there."

The shepherd craned his neck forward, whispering: "Oh, you are going to sell yourself to the devil."

"I am going to erase my name," replied Erlefried; and, now since this was to be his last sight of a human being, his heart mounted to his lips and he told him everything. He told him that he was the son of the priest's murderer, and that to escape being dragged into the evil life of the people of Trawies he had pretended to be dead. And he told him of Sela, his beloved, told of the pilgrimage to the cross in the Tärn, of his own evil intentions, and how Sela had fled from him, and how in a delirium of excitement he had written his name upon the Devil's Stone.

And then he confessed what was awaiting him on this Corpus Christi eve, what he must do to counteract it, and that he had now come to take his own life on this spot.

During Erlefried's confession, the shepherd drew down his mouth as if he were again smiling to himself.

"A pretty bad story, that," he said; "and does n't your father help you?"

"He knows nothing about it."

"He is a holy man, he could do something for you!"

"He has all he can do to help himself," thought Erlefried. "I know but one way. If you would only do me a favour, shepherd."

"You may rely upon me," cried the man.

"I am Isaac and you shall be Abraham," said Erlefried, anxiously casting down his eyes, as if he wished to take back the words.

"I understand," said the shepherd; "and you are hoping that an angel will come and stay my arm."

"I *wish* to die!" cried the young man; "I *must* die," he murmured in a feeble voice.

"You are a fool!" answered the shepherd, springing to the ground. Erlefried examined the surface of the stone, his face pale with fright. Only a few traces of his name remained. "There it is," he said, placing his finger upon some tiny brown spots.

"That there?" replied the other. "Ah, if your name is no longer than that, it is n't very long."

“ But it is blood ! ”

“ Makes no difference, good friend ; you only need to pour warm water over it to wash it out,” replied the shepherd.

“ It is easy for you to make light of it,” said the young man, with a sad countenance, “ but you do not know how I feel.”

“ I can imagine how uncomfortable it must be to have the devil after you. But there is one good remedy for it, and I am only surprised that it has not occurred to you yet.”

“ Blood,” murmured Erlefried.

“ You are quite right, but it depends upon how you use it,” said the shepherd, with an expressive glance. “ Is it possible that you have never heard of the magic circle wherein the devil has no power ? Your sweetheart, of whom you just told me, where is she ? ”

“ During the pestilence, she fled with Bart to the Ritscher, but I have heard that they have now returned to their house in the Tärn.”

“ There ’s no time to lose,” said the shepherd ; then, drawing the young man aside, he whispered in his ear, “ In the arms of your beloved is the magic circle.”

Erlefried’s face brightened for a moment, then grew sad again and he shook his head.

“ But I am in earnest, my friend,” insisted the shepherd, and his eyes were frank and clear, at the same time full of mischief and good-nature. “ See here, I am wiser than you think. In the arms of your beloved—but it must be your own true love.”

“ That art thou, Sela ! ” cried Erlefried.

“ In her arms you are safe ! ”

Erlefried was as though rooted to the ground. What a future ! And now it came back to him, what he had often read in old tales : “ In the arms of one’s true love one is safe from the torments of the devil. ” This reawakened belief harmonised quickly with his feelings. He left the stone and the shepherd and hastened away even more rapidly than he had come.

He scorned the winding path ; he broke through underbrush, he ran across clearings and fields, descending, ascending, always straight on towards Bart’s house. It would be possible to reach it before midnight and to fall at her feet when the procession was passing through the gorge to the sacrificial altar.

He would flee to her and say : “ Help me, Sela, fortune has deserted me, God has left me ! ” And then he would tell her everything. If she pardoned, all would be well, he felt that in his heart ; then he would be saved, he knew it for a certainty !

The dark sky above was sown with twinkling stars ; it seemed to Erlefried that they were watching over him, lighting his path in this race for his life, gleaming, trembling for him alone. The Heavenly Powers well knew that a soul was here at stake. A falling star glided rapidly through the air, as though pointing out his way to the house where Sela dwelt.

As he was climbing up the ash-strewn slope of the Tärn, he noticed a gleam of light on the opposite

cliffs of the Dürbach gorge. And soon the torches came in sight. The procession had already started.

Erlefried quickened his pace, his terror increasing with every step, urged on by the fear that he should not reach the house in time. Here and there stood charred tree-trunks, some of which seemed to be moving. One stepped out of the group and followed the fleeing man. It moved slowly, yet was apparently keeping abreast of the hastening form.

The torch-light procession advanced along the mountain gorge. It was headed by a high bier upon which blazed a great torch surrounded by countless smaller lights. Then followed the long line of men with torches, some gleaming brightly, others dimmed by clouds of smoke. Far into the forest echoed the sound of many voices chanting a weird old song. And thus they moved along the gorge, approaching the spot where the altar stood. Erlefried in his overwrought and superstitious mood gave himself up for lost. He dared no longer look behind him, yet he was sure that he heard the footsteps of his hellish pursuer. He stumbled over sticks and stones, but paid no heed to them; he slipped and fell, sending the ashes flying into the air; he sprang again to his feet, which sometimes seemed scarcely to touch the ground. The forest appeared to him endless, and the region whither he was fleeing lay before him like a long, dark band.

The procession had not yet reached its destination; it had stopped to rest, the torches circling in a huge ring about the great central light, which was constantly fed by sticks of pine-wood. Erlefried

now felt one ray of hope. If the procession would only rest long enough and frequently—as was the custom on former Corpus Christi Days, when four stops were made—he might perhaps reach his goal. The delusions of men are often their fate, and Erlefried, no longer capable of a sensible thought, his mind swayed by phantoms, was under the delusion that at the very moment the procession reached the altar in the gorge, his soul would be lost for ever.

He ran with renewed strength. But the procession below soon started, and Bart's house, how far away it still remained! The fugitive was horrified to discover that he had only come as far as the heights of the Tärn, where the cross had formerly stood. As he passed through a ravine the procession below was for the moment hidden from his view, and when it reappeared it was very near the point where the steep precipice shuts in the narrow gorge. There was the stone altar already gleaming in the light of the approaching torches.

Erlefried took the beating of his own heart to be the footsteps of his pursuer; they drew nearer and nearer—his feet trembled, his breath failed him. He was just about to throw himself down and give himself up for all eternity, when the thought came to him: "The cross! It is close by; flee to the cross!"

He hastened to the summit. There lay the mouldering wooden cross upon the ground. Erlefried gave one cry of terror: "If I should not be able to reach even this! O Lord Jesus, save me at Thy cross!" and he fell upon it and lay there unconscious with outstretched arms.

CHAPTER VIII

EVERYONE in the valleys and forests of Tra-wies who was able to walk took part in the night's procession.

The inspired teachings of the man on the Johannesberg, who had now become both seer and prophet, had taken a strong hold upon the people. Fire was the Creator of the world, the Purifier, and the Redeemer! That they all felt. It harmonised with their old faith and yet it was new; it satisfied their religious longings, made occasions for festivals, and was not dependent upon priests.

They had brought Wahnfred down from his mountain, had thrown a long red mantle about him, and he was obliged to walk, as high priest, behind the bier upon which was borne the sacred fire. A few children marched in front of the procession, scattering green leaves and flowers in the path. Regarding this ceremony a dispute had arisen before they started. Sandhok, the forest-keeper, and others, insisted that flowers should not be strewn before this procession, but ashes. It was decided, however, that the sun was also fire, whose warmth had caused the flowers to grow.

Many of the men carried brandy-flasks, that they

might refresh themselves during and after the service, and from the contents of these flasks they drew their inspiration for the fire.

For many days it had seemed as if with the re-establishment of a religious service the people of Trawies were beginning to adopt a better mode of life, and as if through Wahnfred's influence a certain order had been restored; so the aged Bart also left his house and went with his family to Trawies to assist at the Corpus Christi festival. The old man longed to pray once more in public and to hear others pray. He was one of the few who followed the procession with bared head.

Walking with the women, behind the others, was Sela. The service did not appeal to her and she would have preferred to steal away, but she feared the darkness and for this reason she would not even be the last in the procession; she felt as if a whole army of evil spirits were following it. She did not dream that yonder on the dark mountain-top a fugitive was being pursued by a demon within himself.

Sela's heart was full, yet she could not pray. These unruly flames above her head burned all devotion out of her soul and burned wounds therein instead. "What are these people seeking," she thought, "wandering about with torches at midnight?" O child, they are seeking One Who shall bring goodness and light into their lives, even should it be but a delusion and a phantom. They are seeking One Whom they can curse for bringing them into this miserable world, from Whom they can demand reparation for this wretched life on earth. They are

seeking Him Who, symbolised by their burning torches, has been hurled into the depths of the Trach.

Many seek Him with the painful longing of homesickness; many pronounce His name in vain. And there are also many who do not wish to find Him, or to be found by Him. If they do not believe in Him, then their consciences are free; if they must believe, then they must also tremble before His wrath.

To Sela it seemed as if they could not have found Him, for they were so aimlessly wandering with torches through the forest.

With the God in the heart of the Virgin this night's festival had nothing to do. He still remained pure in His holiness. Sela had but one wish: Could she only send the torch-light procession out through the dark forests, out into the wide world to seek for him in whom she believed.

She believed in him so firmly that she could not think it possible that he was dead, although many dreary months had passed since she had seen him. Who can weigh sorrow or count tears? The traces of both were visible in her worn face.

And when, in thinking of her lost one, she felt an overpowering pain, she would pray: "My God, I leave it in Thy hands!" and she was comforted.

Thus Sela longed to pray on this night, but the strange procession disturbed her. And when at last they reached the stone altar where they were to place the fire, and a wild uproar and confusion began; when the people, howling and yelling, clambered

up to gather wood with which to feed the fire; and when they pushed and crowded to light their torches at the sacred flame and, regardless of Wahnfred's warnings, turned upon each other with their firebrands, it was more than the girl could endure. She did not join in the cries of the other women, but slipped quietly away, and behind a projecting rock which entirely hid the wild scene from her view, she sat down and wept.

The procession was over and the crowd dispersed in great confusion. Many a wounded man was carried from the place. The fire on the sacrificial altar still burned. Upon the bits of broken brandy-bottles the blue flames flickered like will-o'-the-wisps.

Above the Ritscher the three stars which in summer proclaim the dawn had already risen. Wahnfred had thrown aside the red mantle and was walking quite alone. He who longs for peace gazes yearningly at the stars. But alas for thee, poor man! if thou hast not peace in thy heart, thou wilt never find it in the stars! The sky is but a mirror of thy soul. Art thou in harmony with thyself, then read the stars. See how some are trembling and quivering in their glow of passion, and how others are softly gleaming. Over the pale Milky Way, which, according to the legend, leads southward to the Holy Church and to St. Peter's grave, hosts of herds are wandering, led by herdsmen carrying their tiny flickering lanterns. Yonder a line of single stars is moving by itself across the dark sky towards the zenith. Farther on they stand in groups, ap-

parently taking counsel with one another; and there, one is falling, quick as a lightning shaft, to the depths below. And they are all aiming for the same goal, the peaceful, the glowing, the known and the unknown dwellers in the starry kingdom: they are seeking God.

They are seeking the One with Whom thou art struggling in thy longing, yet embittered heart!

Sweet Corpus Christi morn, the day of flags and roses and maidens crowned with wreaths! In Sela's heart memories of her childhood arose. On this day, as a sign of maidenly purity, young girls wear a spray of rosemary wound about their heads, when in the procession they follow the Host, "in which He is present as true God and man." Formerly this Feast was celebrated thus in Trawies.

The girl sat and brooded. She was filled with an unspeakable longing for this most glorious festival of Christianity. Breaking a branch from a larch-tree she wound it about her head, then turned in the direction of the Tärn. Here all was burned over and bare. It was already dawn as she ascended the hill to pray before the cross. The vast region spread out before her eyes, the cliffs of the Trasank gleamed like silver in the newly awakened day, and far above, from the summit of the Johannesberg, the half-completed temple shone out through the misty atmosphere. As the girl did not see the cross towering as usual in the forest of Tärn, she thought she had mistaken her way. Suddenly she gave a cry of terror and sprang back a few paces. Then she

hesitated, rubbed her eyes, and looked again. The cross lay yonder upon the ground, and stretched upon it, like the Christ, was the body of a man.

Her first thought was that someone was lying there in mockery. But as she turned to look once more she saw that the face was as pale as marble. Was it some unfortunate or was it a sacred vision? Timidly she approached the prostrate form, her horror increasing. It almost seemed as if the hands and feet were fastened to the wood, the limbs were so strained. The head was resting upon the left arm, the hair fell in locks over the beam. Thus he lay there, illumined by the glow of the early morning.

Without uttering a sound Sela fell upon her knees. She had recognised him, him whom she had been seeking since that day when she had come with him here to this cross. "Erlefried!" she cried, falling upon his breast.

The shock and the shrill scream brought the exhausted man to life.

"Sela!" he said softly, as if dreaming, "my Sela!" and raising his right arm, he threw it about her neck.

She had nearly fainted. He drew her head down to his, he kissed her passionately, reverently: "Dear heavenly angel! I see thee again, thou bright world!" Suddenly he sprang to his feet and gazed about him, a horror-stricken look in his eyes; with one hand he drew the girl to him, with the other he pushed her away: "Sela!" he cried, his voice shaking, "God has deserted me!"

Throwing her arms about his neck, she murmured with trembling lips, "I will not leave thee."

CHAPTER IX

THE light and noise of the day are over, the sky is thickly covered, we no longer hear the belling of the deer in the forest, nor the roaring of the torrent; we hear only the ticking of the eternal clock which measures the life of man.

The narrator of these events was himself filled with amazement at the records and legends concerning Trawies. Yet we should also remember that this age, when people were often victims of monstrous errors, was a different one from our own.

But are we then to-day so perfect? No more so than then. We feel nothing but contempt for the time when people tormented themselves in their fear of meeting the personal devil. The devil troubles us no longer; the phantoms which take possession of our souls receive other names. We cannot comprehend a condition of things where it would be possible for the Church to destroy individuals and a whole community with its curse, without some human law coming to their aid. Let us consider a moment whether a single one of the old prejudices has really disappeared: religion, science, socialism, politics, still have their priests, their false prophets, and their hangmen, to whom thousands fall as a sacrifice.

Human aspirations and passions are the same to-day as then, only the measures taken to satisfy them are more powerful and more politic. That is our victory. But satisfying aspirations does not satisfy mankind; still restless, we are ever searching for truth, and we are made unhappy by its discovery. Only dull minds are able, in their egotism, to sun themselves in the light of their age; the clear-sighted man increases human misery with his knowledge, for he sees nothing but the unfortunates, ever-degenerating, perishing race. And his feelings are not unlike those of the carpenter, Wahnfred, in his outcast Trawies. Still upheld by his own heart, thirsting for life, and by his spirit struggling for freedom, he cannot believe that all is lost; he is seeking a way of escape, he is seeking ideals, he is seeking God.

There have always been heaven seekers, each one struggling with all his powers to reach his goal—even should this be only a heaven on earth. The majority of mankind seek for heaven; it is those rarer souls, with higher aspirations, who seek for God. They search for that which they feel is above or behind all material force, and they are tormented and at the same time happy in striving to attain their ideal.

Our age especially has produced a race of God seekers. They call Him by many names, still they seek Him; they do not wish to confess Him, nor can they do without Him. Those who are conscious of having lost God may be unhappy, although they are not lost themselves. They will not sink deeper, they

will rise; for man seeks God, or what he understands as God, not below, but above himself. He creates God in his own image; this image is the most perfect man conceivable, a model necessary to every living, striving soul.

False teachings and misunderstandings, alas! how many! But should he whose own heart has bled and must bleed in the struggle stand here as judge? The paths of the seekers are devious and many are not less visionary than those over which Wahnfred, the carpenter, and his son wandered. Many place splinters and bits of glass in their shoes and stagger forward, leaning on a pilgrim's staff. Many go by the broad road, laughing, singing, and dancing. And many lose their way and wander about in the wilderness, struggling with their own souls which are filled with ever-increasing longings, until, with one despairing glance at the heights above, they fall to the ground and perish.

Upon all roads and in all deserts,—you may go eastward, you may go westward, north or south,—everywhere you will find traces of the God seekers: here a bed of roses, yonder a stone altar; here a sword, yonder a cross. The cry of the dervish in the mosque, the rattling and clapping in the wigwam, the music of the cathedral bell, all are the cry of anguish of the suffering sons of earth for a divine Saviour. It is the passionate longing for a Power which conquers the brute in us, frees our spirit, and gives us perfection.

But there are many—and who can withstand their powerful, terrible teachings!—who burrow their way

through the animal kingdom, through plant life and mould, into the heart of the earth. They are not God seekers: they deny the ideal, they seek the real, They long for the right, but find it not, for on the road to Truth they have grown blind. May they never succeed in quite undermining the ground where happier men tread!

And may the God seekers to-day and in the future find their longed-for symbol, their expiation, in a better way than our poor, repentant, ignorant Wahnfred was forced to find his!

Trawies must perish! It has no God, for it has no ideal and no law.

Upon the Johannesberg resounded the blows of the hammer. They re-echoed through the wide forests where spring was weaving her garment of green. And the mightiest trees crashed and fell.

Wahnfred had succeeded in placing the men of Trawies best capable of working under the yoke. It was partly superstition and their religious longings which made them labour so industriously on the temple, and it was partly the fantastic words and sermons of the carpenter, and partly the charm of regular work itself.

They finally came to believe that in this building they were erecting a fortress, wherein they might defend themselves against the world outside, which they hated and feared more and more. The forests of Trawies lay in the midst of the enemy's land, and the isolated Trasank mountain was the only place of refuge where the outlawed people felt secure. Not

a week passed that someone from these forests was not murdered while attempting to cross the border. Now that peace and order had been re-established in the surrounding country and since every effort of friendly assistance had proved futile, still more stringent measures had been adopted against the outcasts. It was at last clear that they must be overpowered and wiped out, or left to perish by themselves.

And these denizens of the forest realised this and resisted madly. They crossed the ring of fire in hordes and plundered farms and committed murders on the highway.

Once a troop of peasants and soldiers came from the region of the "Five Pines" with the intention of annihilating the robber nest by the Trach. But the men of Trawies, although behaving like brutes towards each other, united quickly against this common enemy, and a terrible battle took place by the Dreiwand in which Trawies was victorious.

At the time of the pestilence, when it was nearing its end, two strangers arrived in the valley of the Trach. They wore long cloaks, under which they carried various implements concealed that might have been either tools or weapons, but were probably both. These strangers pretended to be physicians, who, having heard that a certain herb, a sure antidote for the black death, was growing on the cliffs of the Trasank, had come to gather it. This was most interesting news to the people. They looked the strangers over, followed them, and showed themselves ready to oblige them in every

way. Physicians? They might also be magicians! Their appearance was sufficiently mysterious. They wandered about for several days in the neighbourhood, calling at various houses to exchange friendly greetings. At last they explained that, not wishing to act on their own responsibility, they would like to speak with the head of the parish to inquire if they might be allowed to gather the herbs.

The head of the parish! No one really knew to whom to refer the strangers. The people, however, were quite ready to grant them their permission to gather the herbs, provided that they should receive their share of them. But as the men continued to insist on speaking with the chief man in Trawies, they were finally taken up the Johannesburg to Wahnfred.

And to him they confided their mission. They were, in fact, physicians, although physicians of the soul, sent by the Good Shepherd, Who Himself had once wandered over the earth seeking lost sheep. They were messengers from the Holy Church, that wished not the death of the sinners, but that they should repent and live. And it had sent the following message: Once more, and for the last time, the Church offered pardon for their crimes. It was ready to open its arms to receive the parish back among the faithful, also to mediate for them with the law, on the condition that they should deliver into the hands of the authorities seven of their worst criminals to expiate their sins by death.

Wahnfred replied that it was indeed time that the Church should attempt to re-establish this poor par-

ish, which it had so ruthlessly cast out when it was composed mostly of innocent men; however, he could not promise to deliver into their hands the seven criminals; but in place of these he, the originator of all the trouble, the murderer of the priest of Trawies, was ready to surrender himself to justice.

The messengers replied that their powers did not extend as far as this, for it was no longer a question of the murdered priest, whose death had been already expiated by the eleven heads at the time the murder occurred, but rather of the horrible desecrations committed against God and the Church, and of the countless crimes of which the people of Trawies had since been guilty.

Wahnfred answered that it would be an injustice to punish only seven out of so many criminals, for if the penalty were to reach all the evil-doers in Trawies, not one inhabitant would be left. He then described the misery and the trouble of recent years, how the people were plunged into sin, and how they had already suffered sufficiently for it. And he implored for mercy.

The two strangers shuddered; at the same time they were touched by the story told them so eloquently by this man. They felt the passionate spirit breathing through his words as he pleaded for his unfortunate fellow-men, and in his dark eye, in his strange speech, was a something which filled them with awe. Noticing the little lamp burning in his room in the middle of the day, they asked its meaning. He replied that it was the eternal light which

had been preserved in Trawies through all the darkness and storms unto this day.

The priestly messengers thought of the eternal light upon the altar and praised the piety of the keeper of the light as a remnant of godliness, and they expressed the hope that the Holy Church would at last allow mercy to take the place of justice and would receive the poor sinners back into her loving care.

Wahnfred crossed his hands upon his breast and his pale face glowed with joyful excitement. In spirit he already saw the expiation and the re-establishment of his native parish in harmony with society and under the protection of the Church.

The conference, however, was not ended when a loud tumult was heard before the house. A suspicion had arisen in the minds of a few of the people that something besides herb-gatherers was concealed beneath the long mantles. Once aroused, the idea was conveyed to others, and the strangers were watched and followed to Wahnfred's house. When the people who were listening outside perceived whither the conversation was leading, they burst open the door with an enraged cry: They would not be betrayed and sold; rather would they be hanged than give themselves up to rulers with whose manner of caring for Trawies they were already familiar.

"We will have nothing to do with masters who have given us such a hell on earth," they said.

"And who can also give you heaven," interrupted one of the strangers.

“The priests have no heaven but the heaven on earth, which they keep for themselves. And as for the one they offer us in the other world, that is of very little concern to them.”

“My good people,” said the stranger, “your horizon is small. But if you should wander a thousand years, search all the roads in the world, enter all the huts, and visit all the palaces, you would not find a single soul who has a heaven on earth. You would see many living amid the splendours of this world who are condemning others to hell while carrying a tormenting hell about in their own hearts. Oh, believe us, people of Trawies, we do not pretend to be better or greater than you; but it is our duty—laid upon us by God and by human laws—to turn the eyes of men away from their own misery towards the Eternal Father and towards future happiness, that they may not despair. Whosoever follows our guidance sees heaven open before him and the earthly paths are illumined by heavenly rays. But he who turns defiantly away, scorning our teachings, by which all humanity should be led, must justly bear the misery of the outcast.”

“Knock him down!” screamed a man in the frenzied crowd.

“You have experienced it yourselves!” cried the stranger with increasing zeal. “The Church has withdrawn her hand from you and what have you become? A band of blasphemers, adulterers, robbers, and murderers!”

Those were the last words of the unfortunate man. The next moment he lay stretched upon the

ground. His companion escaped, dripping with blood, but he never crossed the ring of fire. Wahn-fred endeavoured, at the risk of his own life, to appease the infuriated mob. And when, under the darkness of night, he buried the stranger on the mountain, he also buried his last remnant of hope. He was now convinced that from outside there was no salvation for Trawies—it remained irretrievably lost.

-And the more he strove to exert his influence over these brutalised people, so much the more earnestly did he preach the terrible Eternal God, who had appeared to them in the fire, and with so much the more zeal did he urge on the building of their house of prayer.

CHAPTER X

THROUGHOUT the forests was heard the sound of the axe, and on many an ancient tree the men worked for days. And then the mighty trunk crawled on a hundred feet—for as many branches as it had formerly possessed, just so many men now clung to its sides, carrying it up the mountain. The reddish, gleaming walls of the temple grew higher and higher. The logs were roughly hewn but they were solidly crowded together at the corners. Towards the east a narrow opening was left for an entrance; high in the walls, higher than man could reach, seven windows had been cut, so small that even a cat could have hardly passed through them.

Wahnfred was the master builder. In the second year the temple was ready for the roof. The workmen, who were difficult to manage and were constantly quarrelling with one another, now demanded a holiday. Wahnfred granted it, and, gathered about a great fire, before which the game was roasting, they held their feast. On such occasions they were glad to unite in bonds of brotherhood, only to sever them the next moment. Roughly spoken words were their expression of friendship,

although they were far more inclined to snatch the choice bits from one another's mouths. Hand-to-hand fights were of frequent occurrence; thus it came about that many were injured while at work on the building. But when Wahnfred's dark eye was upon them they laboured quietly. The slender, long-bearded man, as he walked about among the trees, with a gleaming axe in his hand, looking as if he would rather strike off the head of a man than plunge the blade into the wood, was a strange, weird sight.

No one accompanied him when he strode rapidly through the dense forest of the Johannesburg, sometimes tearing through almost impenetrable thickets, as if he would brush off some object which was clinging to him. No one saw him standing upon the meadows, gazing down into the valley, where to the right lay the Gestade and to the left Trawies, with the gleaming walls of the old church. And then he would look over at the heights where Bart's house stood—but not often and with little satisfaction. His son Erlefried, whom he had twice given up for dead, had reappeared. When he heard that he had been shot by robbers, he had wept for this son for whom he had hoped a happier lot than had been his own. And when later he learned that Erlefried had perished in the forest fire, he rejoiced that it had been granted his child to leave this world while yet innocent. But he still lived,—lived to meet a day when he must share the expiation with Trawies. And perhaps justly now.

He would have been glad to see his son once

more, but he dreaded the meeting. He bore in his soul the image of the frank, pure, childish face of his beloved Erlefried, and this image had been his comfort and happiness in his unhappy life. Now he feared that he must see a pale, haggard countenance, bearing the imprint of crime and misery. It disturbed him that Erlefried had not been to see him. Was it meant for a silent judgment of his deed? Well and good; if so, he blessed his son for it. But should it be a lack of filial love, he would not bless him. Ah, no, Wahnfred may neither bless nor curse; Heaven might turn the blessing of such a man into a curse! He was also surprised that Erlefried took no part in the building of the temple. If he avoided work, what could protect or save him?

From the summit of the mountain the sounds of the raising the heavy beams for the roof, the hammering of the carpenters, and the shouting of the wood-cutters re-echoed throughout the forest.

Wahnfred listened joyfully to these sounds; they were more comforting to him than Easter bells. Thus alone could a future be assured. If he could succeed in busying the people regularly, so that after the temple was completed they would turn to their fields, much would be accomplished. If they only had their land again they would endeavour to defend and care for it, and they would then see the necessity of uniting with the world and of once more becoming a part of their fatherland.

Thus was the man on the Johannesberg tossed about between despair and hope. He yielded quickly to every mood. He had not finished

picturing to himself the blessings which honest work might bring to Trawies—for work was the only thing which could remove the sting of the curse and make the community worthy of the protection of the State—when the noise on the building above him suddenly ceased and an unusual uproar was heard in its place.

Above the branches of the young fir-trees gleamed the beams of the roof clearly outlined against the sky. The workmen left the ridge and gables and quickly descended to the ground. Cries and curses, interspersed with shots, filled the air. A messenger was already hastening through the woods to call the master. Soon Wahnfred understood the cause of the tumult. They must defend their building; enemies had arrived, a whole rabble of vagabonds and highway-robbers, and were trying to set the new fortress on fire. The struggle was being fought with all kinds of weapons—cudgels, pick-axes, guns, stones, and sticks. As the trees had been falling, so now the men fell. The besiegers had succeeded in hurling a firebrand into the building, but its defenders had quickly smothered the flames. The screaming was so loud that Wahnfred's voice could not be heard.

“Down with the prison!” was the war-cry of the besiegers. “We need no dungeon!” But their voices grew fainter and fainter and soon changed into groans and death-rattles. A few escaped; the rest were taken prisoners and placed before the judge. Wahnfred asked them: “Why have you come to destroy the temple?”

“ Because we *must*,” answered the leader in an angry voice.

“ Who is the master who forces you ? ”

“ Our left hand.”

“ We will strike it off,” said Wahnfred.

“ Do it! And from out the ground it will stretch forth the three fingers by which we have sworn ! ”

“ What have you sworn ? ”

“ To destroy everything that can be destroyed.”

“ Oh, you pitiable creatures, and you yourselves are writhing upon the ground like worms to be trod upon.”

“ Tread upon us, then! You will only be obeying our own laws. To-morrow you shall be trod upon. We are everywhere and all powerful. Do you know who we are ? ”

“ Reprobates! Criminals!” cried Wahnfred.

“ Ha, those are tame words, pet names, with which you like to flatter one another. We are the redeemers,—we are the ‘ Children of Eternal Death.’ ”

“ You are madmen ! ”

“ To your blind eyes.”

“ You know not what you want.”

“ Do you know ? ” cried the prisoner. “ You would live and you see that everyone must die; you want happiness and do everything that will bring you sorrow. You are the madmen; we know what we are doing, and we will put an end to this monster. Everything must be exterminated! We threw fire into the Tärn, we brought the pestilence to Tra-wies. When the world is rotten, all must perish ! ”

Wahnfred grew deathly pale. Here, all at once, this monster stood before him—full grown and unfettered. That which he had heretofore carried about with him as a shadow was now terribly clear, terribly true. Of all the ways that he had tried, *this* must be the right one! Of all the gospels which he had thought out, this was the greatest! The greatest and the last!—Annihilation!

Wahnfred laughed. His laughter re-echoed from the walls of the new building. His head seemed to be growing more erect, his long hair was as if alive; he raised his thin hands and stood there and laughed. The people of Trawies had seen many a fearful sight, but never one so terrible as Wahnfred now appeared to them.

His laughter ceased, his pallor grew more intense, his blazing eyes more fiery than usual. Some covered their faces, murmuring: "I cannot look at him."

"Thus will the Eternal Judge appear at the Judgment Day," whispered others.

Wahnfred now turned to the prisoners, saying: "You are the children of death, and his hangmen, yet you come to destroy this temple?"

"We will destroy it," answered the foremost of the men, with an expression of deepest hatred.

"Then you know not what you do. Then you know not that we have built this temple to that powerful Divinity that destroys everything. This is the House of Fire. In this temple Trawies will assemble to worship this Destroyer and to sacrifice to Him. We will stand by you if you will stand by us. Fire shall be our flag by which we all swear!"

The "Children of Eternal Death" did not understand him, even as no one could understand him, but they longed for life and they swore by the flag. It is always thus with those who think that "eternal death" is best; they live, ah, how willingly! And why should they not? They are but flies born to live a single day in the kingdom of life, and such an opportunity to laugh and to weep will not come to them soon again.

The Trawiesers had greatly increased their strength by the addition of the "Children of Eternal Death," and the work proceeded.

Wahnfred descended to his house and took the lamp, wherein the little flame of the fire guardian still brightly glowed, and gazed into the light so long and so steadily that it began to quiver and tremble before his eyes; then he said: "All the stars have disappeared; thou alone hast remained with us!"

Two days before Midsummer Day the block-house was completed. They called it the block-house, although it was not one in reality, for the defences were lacking; Wahnfred had promised that these should be put up later, but in the meantime the new building should be simply a temple, whose strength should be demonstrated from within, rather than from without. It towered upon the mountain like a citadel and could be seen from far and wide. It covered nearly as much space as the church in Trawies. From a distance it seemed to be without windows; the roof rose in an abrupt angle and the gable had been decorated with wreaths of evergreen.

Viewed close by, the walls were rough and rude and at the corners the ends of the beams were uneven and of different lengths. The entrance was narrow and closed by a massive door furnished with heavy bars and locks, like that of a prison. The old blacksmith from the valley had made the double lock, which included a *Himmelsriegel* (a heaven's bolt), whose secret neither enemy nor friend could divine without the key, and this Wahnfred kept in his possession. The interior of the building was dimly lighted. The little rings of sunshine penetrating through the tiny round windows rested on the walls like gleaming lamps. The floor was made of logs hewn flat on the upper side. Against the wall opposite the door stood a broad stone pedestal as altar. Above this in a niche was the place for the holy relics. The arch of the roof resembled that of a basilica, although the heavy rafters were more numerous and arranged with greater irregularity; it was a confused mass of logs, boards, and beams, which seemed designed to support the roof.

The building was completed without a festival or consecration of any kind. The dedication was to take place on Midsummer Day, and all who called themselves Trawiesers and were opposed to a reconciliation with the Church and State were invited by Wahnfred to participate. He who did not appear upon the Johannesberg on this occasion should be banished from Trawies for ever. A number of men were busy in the interior decorating the beams with green boughs and bright bunting. They talked very freely with one another; they rejoiced to

have a church, for now their festivals would begin again.

“ Nothing will ever begin again with that man,” cried one of the workmen defiantly.

“ With what man ? ”

“ With our high priest, Wahnfred. He cares nothing for festivals. He is embittered. He is a man before whom one must stand in awe ! ”

“ *Mein Gott!* who is going to be afraid ? If he becomes too unruly we will split open his skull. ”

Wahnfred descended one day to the valley and walked along the banks of the Trach ; he longed to see his son Erlefried. He passed the Dreiwand and crossed the square where Gallo Weissbucher's house had once stood. He was fighting against reminiscences, which, like snakes, were winding themselves about his heart. In the Dürbach gorge he suddenly came upon a man lying in the grass ; he appeared to be dead ; the head was resting upon a stone by the bank, the hands hanging over into the roaring stream below. Wahnfred stopped a short distance away from the prostrate form, which seemed to be that of a young man ; the feet were bare, the hair was blond and curly. What if it should be Erlefried ? He thought of the murdered priest in the church. What if this should be the atonement ! He tried to call him by the familiar name, but he could only groan. At the same moment the figure turned and rose ; in his hand wriggled a trout.

“ Erlefried ! ” burst from Wahnfred's lips. It was he. In all his strength and beauty he stood

there. He was perfectly calm, but, as a sign that he was conscious of the gravity of this meeting, he at once threw the fish back into the water.

“ Erlefried ! ” repeated Wahnfred, and the young man felt the reproach which lay in his voice.

“ Art thou seeking me, father ? ” he asked.

“ The son seems to have forgotten his father, ” replied Wahnfred.

“ I have not forgotten thee, but I should not have sought thee. ”

“ Thou wilt come on Midsummer Day to the Johannesberg to the dedication of the new temple ? ” said Wahnfred.

“ I shall stay away, ” replied Erlefried ; “ I have something else to do. I am glad to tell thee, father, that on Midsummer Day I am to take a wife. ”

Wahnfred was silent for a little, then he murmured : “ For a long time I thought that thou wert dead. ”

“ Believe it still, father ; it will be better for thee, ” answered the young man ; “ I cannot go thy way, I cannot. I pray that it may be the right one for thee. But leave me to my pleasures in the green woods. ”

“ The pleasures of the forest are dangerous, ” answered Wahnfred. “ I would call all, everyone, from the forests and gather them into the fold. ”

“ Leave me alone, ” said Erlefried ; “ I am going to clear the forest and plough the fields. Bart has given me his house by the Tärn, and there I will live and die in peace with my Sela. ”

Wahnfred’s reply is not related, nor what were

his sensations as he stood before his son. The thoughts of the one were of sorrow and death; those of the other, of happiness and life.

“We cannot help it that we have grown such strangers to one another,” said Erlefried, “but in heaven it will be recorded that we belong together. Farewell, father!”

“And thou wilt refuse thy hand to thy old father, who has been deserted by God and man!” said Wahnfred, and with a cry of pain he fell upon the young man’s neck. “O child, O my child! hast thou then quite forgotten the poor man whose happiness on earth thou hast been in the years gone by? Hast thou forgotten thy mother, who so often held us both in her arms, as I now hold thee and where I would always keep thee, my beloved child? Oh, come with me, Erlefried; thou art young and good, now thou mayest safely die—the only one among us lost ones who may safely die. See, thy path leads thee so near to heaven’s gates, beyond which thy forefathers await thee, and thy mother, and there dwells thy God. Oh, do not say that thou art too young and that thou wouldst enjoy this beautiful world. If thou dost not turn now, thy path will soon lead thee back to the world,—the false world,—will lead thee astray, and thou wilt be overcome by thy passions. Thou shalt encounter fear, care, and crime; where thou wouldst find happiness, pain awaits thee. To weep at graves will be the lightest of thy troubles. Faithlessness will shake thy confidence, the misery of mankind will destroy thy faith in God; thou wilt be able neither to pray nor

to weep; thou shalt be held responsible for all thy acts, whether committed in love, in hatred, or in despair. Then wilt thou, like one overtaken by night, seek this path which I would have thee choose to-day; each step aside from it will lead thee nearer to thy destruction. Erlefried, think of thy soul!"

The young man looked up in astonishment; the last words were like a knife through his heart and his evil demon asked him if his soul were really saved or belonged to the devil. Wahnfred noticed his hesitation, and with blazing eyes he continued:

"And think of her whom thou hast chosen. Bring thy bride; she is like a flower in the snow, she is an angel among the damned; save her for God. Give her heaven as a wedding-gift, for only in heaven are marriages made—never forget that, my son! Oh, do not let thyself be deceived; the world is lost, all is over! I will lead thee, we will enter the heavenly kingdom together!"

Erlefried now recognised what was speaking to him; in the face of madness he became calm and he sought to escape from the weird visionary. Wahnfred trembled with excitement, and seizing the young man with both arms he cried: "Away, away, thou hellish devil! I will have my child, I will not let him go. Oh, stand by me, Heavenly Powers! Ye angels of God, stand by me!"

A madman! Erlefried exerted his whole strength, and hurling the crazed man from him he fled.

Upon the summit of the hill he stopped and looked back, but he no longer saw his father. And now an unspeakable sadness overcame him, a heart-

rending pity for the poor man. He returned to look for him by the stream that he might accompany him to his house, but he had already gone.

Sadly Erlefried went on his way, resolving that for love of his father he would go to the dedication of the temple upon the Johannesberg. And he made the proposal to Sela that they should combine their own wedding festival with this ceremony.

“For thy sake,” she replied.

“I thank thee,” he said, his eyes beaming with happiness; “and now, Dear-heart, laugh and be merry again!”

“I cannot,” she whispered, laying her head upon his breast; “my Erlefried, I am afraid!”

CHAPTER XI

ON the evening before the festival Wahnfred was alone in the temple. He had locked himself in, and was cowering before the altar table gazing at the heavy beams of the roof. With the exception of an occasional crackling, creaking sound in the fresh wood, all was silent. Wahnfred stared like a man in a dream—with a wandering, restless glance—up at the seven little round windows through which the pale light of the departing day shed its soft rays. He murmured the words: “‘ Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. . . . His countenance was as the sun shining in his strength. . . . His eyes were as a flame of fire. . . . And he had in his right hand seven stars; and out of his mouth went a sharp, two-edged sword.’ He is the first and the last. I do not fear, for I have the keys of hell and of death.”

Then he rose, climbed the ladder against the wall to the cross-beam, to which he fastened a chain of straw that reached to the altar below, suspended in the same manner as the chain from which usually hangs the altar lamp. It was broad and loosely

braided and Wahnfred addressed it with these words:

“Thou art the sacred Jacob’s ladder, by which we must climb to heaven—to-morrow—to-morrow shall the seals be broken; like a closed book shall the earth disappear!”

He shuddered and started. It was as if he had heard a cry: “Wahnfred, what art thou doing?”

He asked aloud: “Did someone call me? I will willingly give an account of myself. We are an iniquitous people. Every breath which we draw is a crime. No one but Almighty God can stop our fall into hell. So we come to Thee, O God! Even as I took the oath, so I will now make the expiation—I will extinguish the fire of hell with the fire of earth, I will free the land from the scourge of our presence. The scorpion which has been held prisoner within the ring of flame shall destroy itself. They will say of us that we had grown mad, but they cannot say that we perished in darkness. *We recognised that we were evil and we have exterminated ourselves. That is our victory!*”

When he left the temple he was calm. He felt the summer about him and within him. He had reached his goal—at last—at last! His weary head rested in the arms of God.

During the following night at that small hour which, like a tiny drawbridge, joins to-day with to-morrow, three men were striding through the dewy valley of the Trach, singing the following song:

Fair Midsummer Day is come,
The blessed day !
The golden day !
Arise,
Arise at the dawn's first ray !
From graves emerging,
From slumbers holy,
The guests beloved assemble slowly.
Fire and light our God doth make,
Awake, awake !

And in all the huts and caves were movement and life. But the people could no longer assemble as formerly upon the oak-shaded burial-ground, where under the green sod their beloved dead were resting. The graveyard was overgrown with nettles and brambles. In recent years the dead had been buried wherever they had died. In walking over the meadows and through the woods many a spot could be seen where upon a mound of bare earth an upright board was placed. Thus Trawies had become one great burial-ground. But the mounds were soon covered by weeds, the boards fell over into the grass, and all traces of the graves were lost for ever.

So no one now called as of old: " My father, I waken thee; Midsummer Day is come ! "

On being aroused from their sleep the people called for brandy. Among those who joined the procession were the peasant Isidor, the hunter from the Trasank, Stoss-Nickel, and Ursula, the distiller of the poison. Women clad in rags accompanied them, not towards the Wildwiese, but up the Johannesberg where the new temple was to be dedi-

cated on this day. There were musicians among them, although their instruments brought forth nothing but discordant tones; the very strings were mourning that all harmony had disappeared from Trawies. Torches were moving here and there in a zigzag line towards the Johannesburg.

There was one thing lacking which on former occasions had enlivened this festival; but its loss was scarcely noticed now. There was no merry troop of children present. There were no more children in Trawies; the few who were running about were little wretches.

The procession moved on towards the new temple.

"If we do not go our stern master will cast us out of Trawies," jeered one man.

"And the masters outside will send us back again," answered the others.

"It looks as if it were going to be uncomfortable for us again. Here we must kneel, and out there we must hang; he is as much of a devil as the other."

"Be thankful that we have a God again!"

"This cursed thing won't burn!" cried one of the men, throwing his smoking torch upon the ground.

"Oh, he'll burn you fast enough, you old sinner!"

"A sinner, did you say? Now that seems more like living. Things have been rather bad here these last years, for there have been no sinners in Trawies."

"That's true! Nothing but robbers and villains."

"It will be better now, only we shall have to be good and pious."

Such were the conversations which took place on the way.

Erlefried had chosen an isolated forest path. He climbed the mountain with his Sela from the Gestade. Here they met no one, here they were alone. Even Bart was not with them; he had gone with Sandhok and Tropper to consult with them about the service in the temple. Although at first he had been much opposed to the new teaching, to-day he was in favour of it. He saw the good influence it had upon the people. The Trawiesers were like a swarm of flies that seek out and circle about a flame. And it was a great point gained to assemble them about some central object where they could be governed.

During these years of misfortune Bart had endeavoured to quiet his own conscience by work and a virtuous life. Now, as he was growing old, and as he saw in Trawies this longing for the supernatural again showing itself in the people, and in himself as well, he suddenly heard an inner voice saying: "Bart-from-Tärn, thou also wast one of them!" He too had been present in the Rabenkirche when the murder of the priest was planned, he too was present in Weissbacher's house when they had denied knowledge of the murderer. He was one of the chief criminals, and to expiate his crime innocent men had been beheaded in the church.

As the people were assembling about the building on the mountain, the morning star rose over the Trasank. They were blinded by their torches and did not see it. They were screaming like a crowd

of mad urchins, laughing, wrestling with each other, and cursing. The quietest of all were the pick-pockets, and the most excitable the sallow-faced youths who were following the women. Over their brandy-bottles many marriages were arranged, and death-blows were frequently exchanged.

Bart attempted to stop the drinking.

“ You would take away our fire-water ! ” screamed one of the wildest. “ We ’ll strangle you, you old blasphemer ! Our God is in the brandy, do you not see ? ” He emptied the contents of the jug on the ground, threw a lighted chip upon it, and a blue flame rose from the burning liquid.

Thus the people were conducting themselves on this day upon the Johannesburg, at the hour when the temple, which they were about to dedicate, was standing in the pale light of the approaching dawn. A sudden silence fell upon the crowd. Wahnfred, accompanied by a number of old men, was ascending from his house, carrying the sacred relic—the ancestral fire.

The mood of the people changed at once. Bigotry, with its fanaticism and extravagance, took the place of cursing and laughter. They fell on their faces, their arms stretched out before them. Women went into convulsions—for they had been drinking. They screamed their hymns to the fire, and amid the noise and confusion of the moving multitude it was like the cry of shipwrecked mariners overtaken by a storm. Two men with staffs now forced a way through the crowd for Wahnfred. He wore a long mantle, and the little lantern with the eternal fire

he pressed close to his heart. The soft glow was reflected for a moment in the wild, haggard faces of the kneeling men and women. Thus Wahnfred entered the temple, and behind him the people, pushing, crowding, laughing, and cursing, until the last one was inside. And then the little door closed with a snap. The glow of the lamp with the sacred fire, which was being carried to the altar, quivered on the walls. The next moment a tiny flame was creeping up the hanging chain of straw.

CHAPTER XII

ERLEFRIED and Sela were still wandering through the forest. They carried no torch, they held each other's hands, and they spoke no word. Not until they reached a clearing where they could see the morning star did Erlefried realise that they had missed their path. Sela had the utmost confidence in him. She thought of that Midsummer Day years ago, when as children they had climbed to the Wildwiese. Then, too, they had lost their way among the brambles. At that time little Erlefried had told her such pretty fairy-tales. How changed was everything! As he had grown in the strength and beauty of his manhood, the more silent had he become. To-day he said nothing.

They had gone much too far to the left and at their right were only steep precipices. So they ceased to think of the Johannesberg and pushed ahead. They followed one another, neither knowing whither.

The trees stood in the morning glow, the birds were singing gaily. The path led towards the valley once more and gradually lost itself in underbrush.

The two young people were quite alone, with the

exception of the birds. They walked silently among the trees, they became entangled in brambles, they trod upon the bushes, frightening the lizards at their feet. They worked their way through hazel-bushes, which grew more and more luxuriantly about them—and we will follow them no farther. Of this forest walk the chronicler tells us: "And they were so absorbed in one another that they thought of naught else, for they were filled with heavenly joy."

In vain we listen for their footsteps, in vain we await their return. And while we are thus listening, a strange sound seems to fill the air. It is as if chords were drawn above the heights from rock to forest, and an unseen hand were playing a wild, discordant strain upon them. One long, shrill sound, then all is silent!

In the gorge below, where a moss-grown path led up to the house of Firnerhans, the two young people emerged from the thicket. Their faces were suffused with a soft glow, their hearts trembled with inward bliss, as if they had seen Him Who from eternity to eternity bestows happiness upon His children. They were still silent. Sela's eyes were downcast; Erlefried raised his—moist and lustrous—towards heaven, wondering that the sun was already so high and that it was so red to-day. Above the summit of the Johannesburg rested a lurid cloud, which spread over the sky, on to the upper Trach, where it floated like a blue veil above the church of Trawies, then sank into the valley.

When they reached the clearing below, they could

see that the cloud, dense and heavy, was rising from the summit of the Johannesberg, as if a volcano had broken out there.

Erlefried turned pale. He saw no building on the mountain.

Only one of all those who climbed the Johannesberg to celebrate the Fire Festival on that fateful Midsummer Day ever returned. In telling the story of what he had there beheld he was seized with madness and all traces of him were soon lost.

Erlefried and Sela fled as far as their feet would carry them. On distant meadows, where no dark smoke covered the sun, they began their new life.

During a sultry night in the summer of this same year a heavy storm descended upon the Johannesberg. It whirled the ashes on the summit into the air and scattered them far and wide over the green, uninhabited forests of Trawies.

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