

The Dance of the Dead

By Anonymous

Many a century back, if the old German Chronicle may be credited, an aged wandering bagpiper settled at Neisse, a small town in Silesia. He lived quietly and honestly, and at first played his tunes in secret for his own amusement; but it was not long, as his neighbours delighted in listening to him, and would often in the calm of a warm midsummer evening gather round his door, whilst he called forth the cheering sounds of harmony, before Master Willibald became acquainted both with old and young, was flattered and caressed and lived in content and prosperity.

The gallant beaux of the place, who had near his door first beheld those lovely creatures, for whose sake they had written so much bad poetry, and lost so much more valuable time, were his constant customers for melting songs, while they drowned the softer passages with the depth of their sighs. The old citizens invited him at their solemn dinner-parties; and no bride would have deemed her wedding-feast to be completely celebrated, had not Master Willibald played the bridal dance of his own composition. For this very purpose he had invented a most tender melody, which united gaiety and gravity, playful ideas and melancholy feelings, forming a true emblem of the matrimonial life. A feeble trace of this tune is still to be found in what is called the old German 'Grandfather's Dance', which, as far down as the time of our parents, was an important requisite of a wedding feast, and is even heard now and then in our days. As often as Master Willibald played this tune, the prudest spinster would not refuse to dance, the stooping matron moved again her time-stiffened joints, and the grey-haired grandfather danced it merrily with the blooming offspring of his children. This dance seemed really to restore youth to the old, and this was the cause of its being called, at first in jest, and afterwards generally, the 'Grandfather's Dance'.

A young painter, of the name of Wido, lived with Master Willibald; he was thought to be the son, or the foster-son, of the musician. The effect of the old man's art on this youth was lost. He remained silent and mournful at the most mirth inspiring tunes Willibald played to him; and at the balls to which he was often invited, he rarely mingled with the gay: but would retire into a corner, and fix his eyes on the loveliest fair one that graced the room, neither daring to address, nor to offer her his hand. Her father, the mayor of the town, was a proud and haughty man, who would have thought his dignity lessened, had an unknown limner cast his eye upon his daughter. But the beautiful Emma was not of her father's opinion: for the young girl loved with all the ardour of a first and secret passion, the backward, though handsome youth. Often when she perceived the expressive eyes of Wido endeavouring to catch unobservedly her glances, she would abate her liveliness, and allow the youth of her heart to have the undisturbed view of her beautiful and variable features. She easily read afterwards, in his brightening face, the eloquent gratitude of his heart; and although she turned blushing away, the fire on her cheeks, and the sparkling in her eyes, kindled new flames of love and hope in her lover's bosom.

Master Willibald had for a long time promised to assist the love-sick youth in obtaining his soul's dearest object. Sometimes he intended, like the wizards of yore, to torment the mayor with an enchanted dance, and compel him by exhaustion to grant everything; sometimes, like a second Orpheus, he proposed to carry away, by the power of his harmony, the sweet bride from the Tartarian abode of her father. But Wido always had objections: he never would allow the parent

of his fair one to be harmed by the slightest offence, and hoped to win him by perseverance and complacency.

Willibald told him, 'Thou art an idiot, if thou hopest to win, by an open and honourable sentiment, like thy love, the approbation of a rich and proud old fool. He will not surrender without some of the plagues of Egypt are put in force against him. When once Emma is thine, and he no more can change what has happened, then you wilt find him friendly and kind. I blame myself for having promised to do nothing against thy will, but death acquits every debt, and still I shall help thee in my own way.'

Poor Wido was not the only one on the path of whose life the mayor strewed thorns and briars. The whole town had very little affection for their chief, and delighted to oppose him at every opportunity; for he was harsh and cruel, and punished severely the citizens for trifling and innocent mirth, unless they purchased pardon by the means of heavy penalties and bribes.

After the yearly wine-fair in the month of January, he was in the habit of obliging them to pay all their earnings into his treasury, to make amends for their past merriments. One day the tyrant of Neisse had put their patience to too hard a trial, and broken the list tie of obedience, from his oppressed townsmen. The malcontents had created a riot, and filled their persecutor with deadly fear; for they threatened nothing less than to set fire to his house, and to burn him, together with all the riches he had gathered by oppressing them.

At this critical moment, Wido went to Master Willibald, and said to him, 'Now, my old friend, is the time when you may help me with your art, as you frequently have offered to do. If your music be really so powerful as you say it is, go then and deliver the mayor, by softening the enraged mob. As a reward he certainly will grant you any thing you may request. Speak then a word for me and my love, and demand my beloved Emma as the price of your assistance.' The bag-piper laughed at this speech, and replied, 'We must satisfy the follies of children, in order to prevent them crying.' And so he took his bagpipe and walked slowly down to the town-house-square, where the rioters, armed with pikes, lances, and lighted torches, were laying waste the mansion of the worshipful head of the town.

Master Willibald placed himself near a pillar, and began to play his 'Grandfather's Dance'. Scarcely were the first notes of this favourite tune heard, when the rage-distorted countenances became smiling and cheerful, the frowning brows lost their dark expression, pikes and torches fell out of the threatening fists, and the enraged assailants moved about marking with their steps the measure of the music. At last, the whole multitude began to dance, and the square, that was lately the scene of riot and confusion, bore now the appearance of a gay dancing assembly. The piper, with his magic bag-pipe, led on through the streets, all the people danced behind him, and each citizen returned jumping to his home, which shortly before he had left with very different feelings.

The mayor, saved from this imminent danger, knew not how to express his gratitude; he promised to Master Willibald every thing he might demand, even were it half his property. But the bag-piper replied, smiling, saying his expectations were not so lofty, and that for himself he wanted no temporal goods whatever; but since his lordship, the mayor, had pledged his word to grant to him in every thing he might demand, so he beseeched him, with due respect, to grant fair Emma's hand for his Wido. But the haughty mayor was highly displeased at this proposal. He made every possible excuse; and as Master Willibald repeatedly reminded him of his promise, he did, what the despots of those dark times were in the habit of doing, and which those of our enlightened days still practise, he declared his dignity offended; pronounced Master Willibald to be a disturber of the peace, an enemy of the public security, and allowed him to forget in a prison

the promise of his lord, the mayor. Not satisfied herewith, he accused him of witchcraft, caused him to be tried by pretending he was the very bag-piper and rat-catcher of Hamlin, who was, at that time, and is still in so bad a repute in the German provinces, for having carried off by his infernal art all the children of that ill-fated town. 'The only difference,' said the wise mayor, between the two cases, was, that at Hamlin only the children had been made to dance to his pipe, but here young and old seemed under the same magical influence. By such artful delusions, the mayor turned every merciful heart from the prisoner. The dread of necromancy, and the example of the children of Hamlin, worked so strongly, that sheriffs and clerks were writing day and night. The secretary calculated already the expense of the funeral-pile; the sexton petitioned for a new rope to toll the dead-bell for the poor sinner; the carpenters prepared scaffolds for the spectators of the expected execution; and the judges rehearsed the grand scene, which they prepared to play at the condemnation of the famous bag-piping rat-catcher. But although justice was sharp, Master Willibald was still sharper: for as he once had laughed very heartily over the important preparations for his end, he now laid himself down upon his straw and died!

Shortly before his death, he sent for his beloved Wido, and addressed him for the last time.—'Young man,' said he, 'thou seest, that in thy way of viewing mankind and the world I can render thee no assistance. I am tired of the whims thy folly obliged me to perform. Thou hast now acquired experience enough fully to comprehend, that nobody should calculate, or at least ground, his designs on the goodness of human nature, even if he himself should be too good to lose entirely his belief in the goodness of others. I, for my own part, would not rely upon the fulfilment of my last request to thee, if thine own interest would not induce thee to its performance. When I am dead, be careful to see that my old bag-pipe is buried with me. To detain it would be of no use to thee, but it may be the cause of thy happiness, if it is laid underground with me.' Wido promised to observe strictly the last commands of his old friend, who shortly after closed his eyes. Scarcely had the report of Master Willibald's sudden death spread, when old and young came to ascertain the truth. The mayor was more pleased with this turn of the affair than any other; for the indifference with which the prisoner had received the news of his approaching promotion to the funeral-pile, induced his worship to suppose, the old bagpiper might some fine day be found invisible in his prison, or rather be found not there at all; or the cunning wizard, being at the stake, might have caused a wisp of straw to burn instead of his person, to the eternal shame of the court of Neisse. He therefore ordered the corpse to be buried as speedily as possible, as no sentence to burn the body had yet been pronounced. An unhallowed corner of the churchyard, close to the wall, was the place assigned for poor Willibald's resting-place. The jailor, as the lawful heir of the deceased prisoner, having examined his property, asked what should become of the bag-pipe, as a *corpus delicti*.

Wido, who was present, was on the point to make his request, when the mayor, full of zeal, thus pronounced his sentence:

'To avoid every possible mischief, this wicked, worthless tool shall be buried together with its master.' So they put it into the coffin at the side of the corpse, and early in the morning pipe and piper were carried away and buried. But strange things happened in the following night. The watchmen on the tower were looking out, according to the custom of the age, to give the alarm in case of fire in the surrounding country, when about midnight, they saw, by the light of the moon, Master Willibald rising out of his tomb near the church-yard wall. He held his bag-pipe under his arm, and leaning against a high tomb-stone, upon which the moon shed her brightest rays, he began to blow, and fingered the pipes, just as he was accustomed to do when he was alive.

Whilst the watchmen, astonished at this sight, gazed wisely on one another, many other graves opened; their skeleton-inhabitants peeped out with their bare skulls, looked about, nodded to the measure, rose afterwards wholly out of their coffins, and moved their rattling limbs into a nimble dance. At the church-windows, and the gates of the vaults, other empty eye-holes stared on the dancing place: the withered arms began to shake the iron gates, till locks and bolts sprung off, and out came the skeletons, eager to mingle in the dance of the dead. Now the light dancers stilted about, over the hillocks and tomb-stones, and whirled around in a merry waltz, that the shrouds waved in the wind about the fleshless limbs, until the church-clock struck twelve, when all the dancers, great and small, returned to their narrow cells; the player took his bagpipe under his arm, and likewise returned to his vacant coffin. Long before the dawn of the day, the watchman awoke the mayor, and made him, with trembling lips and knocking knees, the awful report of the horrid night-scene. He enjoined strict secrecy on them, and promised to watch with them the following night on the tower. Nevertheless, the news soon spread through the town, and at the close of the evening, all the surrounding windows and roofs were lined with virtuosi and cognoscenti of the old dark arts, who all before hand were engaged in discussions on the possibility or impossibility of the events they expected to witness before midnight.

The bag-piper was not behind his time. At the first sound of the bell announcing the eleventh hour, he rose slowly, leaned against the tomb-stone, and began his tune. The ball guests seemed to have been waiting for the music; for at the very first notes they rushed forth out of the graves and vaults, through grass hills and heavy stones. Corpses and skeletons, shrouded and bare, tall and small, men and women, all running to and fro, dancing and turning, wheeling and whirling round the player, quicker or more slow according to the measure he played, till the clock tolled the hour of midnight. Then dancers and piper withdrew again to rest. The living spectators, at their windows and on their roofs, now confessed, that 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' The mayor had no sooner retired from the tower, than he ordered the painter to be cast into prison that very night, hoping to learn from his examination, or perhaps by putting him to the torture, how the magic nuisance of his foster-father might be removed.

Wido did not fail, to remind the mayor of his ingratitude towards Master Willibald, and maintained that the deceased troubled the town, bereft the dead of their rest, and the living of their sleep, only because he had received, instead of the promised reward for the liberation of the mayor, a scornful refusal, and moreover had been thrown into prison most unjustly, and buried in a degrading manner. This speech made a very deep impression upon the minds of the magistrates; they instantly ordered the body of Master Willibald to be taken out of his tomb, and laid in a more respectable place. The sexton, to show his perception of the occasion, took the bag-pipe out of the coffin, and hung it over his bed. For he reasoned thus: if the enchanting or enchanted musician could not help following his profession even in the tomb, he at least would not be able to play to the dancers without his instrument. But at night, after the clock had struck eleven, he heard distinctly a knock at his door; and when he opened it, with the expectation of some deadly and lucrative accident requiring his skill, he beheld the buried Master Willibald in propria persona. 'My bag-pipe,' said he, very composedly, and passing by the trembling sexton, he took it from the wall where it was hung up: then he returned to his tomb-stone, and began to blow. The guests, invited by the tune, came like the preceding night, and were preparing for their midnight dance in the church-yard. But this time the musician began to march forward and proceeded with his numerous and ghastly suite through the gate of the church-yard to the town,

and led his nightly parade through all the streets, till the clock struck twelve, when all returned again to their dark abodes.

The inhabitants of Neisse now began to fear, lest the awful night wanderers might shortly enter their own houses. Some of the chief magistrates earnestly entreated the mayor to lay the charm, by making good his word to the bag-piper. But the mayor would not listen to it; he even pretended that Wido shared in the infernal arts of the old rat-catcher, and added, 'The dauber deserves rather the funeral-pile than the bridal-bed.' But in the following night the dancing spectres came again into the town, and although no music was heard, yet it was easily seen by their emotions, that the dancers went through the figure of the 'Grandfather's Dance'. This night they behaved much worse than before. For they stopped at the house wherein a betrothed damsel lived, and here they turned in a wild whirling dance round a shadow, which resembled perfectly the spinster, in whose honour they moved the nightly bridal-dance. Next day the whole town was filled with mourning; for all the damsels whose shadows were seen dancing with the spectres, had died suddenly. The same thing happened again the following night. The dancing skeletons turned before the houses, and wherever they had been, there was, next morning, a dead bride lying on the bier.

The citizens were determined no longer to expose their daughters and mistresses to such an imminent danger. They threatened the mayor to carry Emma away by force and to lead her to Wido, unless the mayor would permit their union to be celebrated before the beginning of the night. The choice was a difficult one, for the mayor disliked the one just as much as the other; but as he found himself in the uncommon situation, where a man may choose with perfect freedom, he, as a free being, declared freely his Emma to be Wido's bride.

Long before the spectre-hour the guests sat at the wedding-table. The first stroke of the bell sounded, and immediately the favourite tune of the well-known bridal-dance was heard. The guests, frightened to death, and fearing the spell might still continue to work, hastened to the windows, and beheld the bag-piper, followed by a long row of figures in white shrouds, moving to the wedding-house. He remained at the door and played; but the procession went on slowly, and proceeded even to the festive hail. Here the strange pale guests rubbed their eyes, and looked about them full of astonishment, like sleep walkers just awakened. The wedding guests fled behind the chairs and tables; but soon the cheeks of the phantoms began to colour, their white lips became blooming like young rose-buds; they gazed at each other full of wonder and joy, and well-known voices called friendly names. They were soon known as revived corpses, now blooming in all the brightness of youth and health: and who should they be but the brides whose sudden death had filled the whole town with mourning, and who, now recovered from their enchanted slumber, had been led by Master Willibald with his magic pipe, out of their graves to the merry wedding-feast. The wonderful old man blew a last and cheerful farewell tune, and disappeared. He was never seen again.

Wido was of the opinion the bag-piper was none other than the famous Spirit of the Silesian Mountains. The younger painter met him once when he travelled through the hills, and acquired (he never knew how) his favour. He promised the youth to assist him in his love-suit, and he kept his word, although after his own jesting fashion.

Wido remained all his life-time a favourite with the Spirit of the Mountains. He grew rich, and became celebrated. His dear Emma brought him every year a handsome child, his pictures were sought after even in Italy and England; and the 'Dance of the Dead', of which Basil, Antwerp, Dresden, Lubeck, and many other places boast, are only copies or imitations of Wido's original painting, which he had executed in memory of the real 'Dance of the Dead at Neisse'! But, alas I

this picture is lost, and no collector of paintings has yet been able to discover it, for the gratification of the cognoscenti, and the benefit of the history of art.