

The Spider of Guyana

By Erckmann-Chatrian

The mineral waters of Spinbronn, in Hundsruok, a few leagues from Pirmesans, formerly enjoyed an excellent reputation, for Spinbronn was the rendezvous of all the gouty and rheumatic members of the German aristocracy. The wild nature of the surrounding country did not deter the visitors, for they were lodged in charming villas at the foot of the mountain. They bathed in the cascade that fell in large sheets of foam from the summit of the rocks, and drank two or three pints of the water every day. Dr. Daniel Haselnoos, who prescribed for the sick and those who thought they were, received his patients in a large wig, brown coat, and ruffles, and was rapidly making his fortune.

Today, however, Spinbronn is no longer a favorite watering place. The fashionable visitors have disappeared; Dr. Haselnoos has given up his practice; and the town is only inhabited by a few poor, miserable woodcutters. All this is the result of a succession of strange and unprecedented catastrophes, which Councillor Bremen, of Pirmesans, recounted to me the other evening.

“You know, Mr. Fritz,” he said, “that the source of the Spinbronn flows from a sort of cavern about 5 feet high, and from 10 feet to 15 feet across; the water, which has a temperature of 67 degrees centigrade, is salt. The front of the cavern is half hidden by moss, ivy, and low shrubs, and it is impossible to find out the depth of it, because of the thermal exhalations that prevent any entrance.

“In spite of that, it had been remarked for a century that the birds of the locality—hawks, thrushes, and turtledoves—were engulfed in full flight, and no one knew of what mysterious influence it was the result. During the season of 1801, for some unexplained reason, the source became more abundant, and the visitors one evening, taking their constitutional promenade on the lawns at the foot of the rocks, saw a human skeleton descend from the cascade.

“You can imagine the general alarm, Mr. Fritz. It was naturally supposed that a murder had been committed at Spinbronn some years before, and that the victim had been thrown into the source. But the skeleton, which was blanched as white as snow, only weighed twelve pounds; and Dr. Haselnoos concluded that, in all probability, it had been in the sand more than three centuries to have arrived at that state of desiccation.

“Plausible as his reasoning was, it did not prevent many visitors leaving that same day, horrified to have drunk the waters. The really gouty and rheumatic ones, however, stayed on, and consoled themselves with the doctor’s version. But the following days the cavern disgorged all that it contained of detritus; and a veritable ossuary descended the mountain—skeletons of animals of all sorts, quadrupeds, birds, reptiles. In fact, all the most horrible things that could be imagined.

“Then Haselnoos wrote and published a pamphlet to prove that all these bones were relics of the antediluvian world, that they were fossil skeletons, accumulated there in a sort of funnel during the universal Deluge, that is to say, four thousand years before Christ; and, consequently, could only be regarded as stones, and not as anything repulsive.

“But his work had barely reassured the gouty ones, when one fine morning the corpse of a fox, and then of a hawk, with all its plumage, fell from the cascade. Impossible to maintain that these had existed before the Deluge, and the exodus became general.

“‘How horrible!’ cried the ladies. ‘That is where the so-called virtue of mineral waters springs from. Better die of rheumatism than continue such a remedy.’

“At the end of a week the only visitor left was a stout Englishman, Commodore Sir Thomas Haverbrook, who lived on a grand scale, as most Englishmen do. He was tall and very stout, and of a florid complexion. His hands were literally knotted with gout, and he would have drunk no matter what if he thought it would cure him. He laughed loudly at the desertion of the sufferers, installed himself in the best of the villas, and announced his intention of spending the winter at Spinbronn.”

Here Councillor Bremen leisurely took a large pinch of snuff to refresh his memory, and with the tips of his fingers shook off the tiny particles, which fell on his delicate lace jabot. Then he went on.

Five or six years before the revolution of 1789, a young doctor of Pirmesans, called Christian Weber, went to St. Domingo to seek his fortune. He had been very successful, and was about to retire, when the revolt of the negroes occurred. Happily he escaped the massacre, and was able to save part of his fortune. He traveled for a time in South America, and about the period of which I speak, returned to Pirmesans, and bought the house and what remained of the practice of Dr. Haselnoß.

Dr. Christian Weber brought with him an old negress called Agatha; a very ugly old woman, with a flat nose, and enormous lips. She always enveloped her head in a sort of turban of the most startling colors; and wore rings in her ears that reached to her shoulders. Altogether she was such a singular-looking creature that the mountaineers came from miles around just to look at her.

“The doctor himself was a tall, thin man, invariably dressed in a blue swallow-tailed coat and leather breeches. He talked very little, his laugh was dry and nervous, and his habits most eccentric. During his wanderings he had collected a number of insects of almost every species, and seemed to be much more interested in them than in his patients. In his daily rambles among the mountains he often found butterflies to add to his collection, and these he brought home pinned to the lining of his hat.

“Dr. Weber, Mr. Fritz, was my cousin and my guardian, and directly he returned to Germany he took me from school, and settled me with him at Spinbronn. Agatha was a great friend of mine, though at first she frightened me, but she was a good creature, knew how to make the most delicious sweets, and could sing the most charming songs.

“Sir Thomas and Dr. Weber were on friendly terms, and spent long hours together talking of subjects beyond my comprehension—of transmission of fluids, and mysterious things they had observed in their travels. Another mystery to me was the singular influence that the doctor appeared to have over the negress, for though she was generally particularly lively, ready to be amused at the slightest thing, yet she trembled like a leaf if she encountered her master’s eyes fixed upon her.

“I have told you that birds, and even large animals, were engulfed in the cavern. After the disappearance of the visitors, some of the old inhabitants remembered that about fifty years before a young girl, Loisa Muller, who lived with her grandmother in a cottage near the source, had suddenly disappeared. She had gone out one morning to gather herbs, and was never seen or heard of again, but her apron had been found a few days later near the mouth of the cavern. From that it was evident to all that the skeleton about which Dr. Haselnoß had written so eloquently was that of the poor girl, who had, no doubt, been drawn into the cavern by the mysterious influence that almost daily acted upon more feeble creatures. What that influence was nobody

could tell. The superstitious mountaineers believed that the devil inhabited the cavern, and terror spread throughout the district.

“One afternoon, in the month of July, my cousin was occupied in classifying his insects and rearranging them in their cases. He had found some curious ones the night before, at which he was highly delighted. I was helping by making a needle red-hot in the flame of a candle.

“Sir Thomas, lying back in a chair near the window and smoking a big cigar, was regarding us with a dreamy air. The commodore was very fond of me. He often took me driving with him, and used to like to hear me chatter in English. When the doctor had labeled all his butterflies, he opened the box of larger insects.

“‘I caught a magnificent horn-beetle yesterday,’ he said, ‘the *lucanus cervus* of the Hartz oaks. It is a rare kind.’

“As he spoke I gave him the hot needle, which he passed through the insect preparatory to fixing it on the cork. Sir Thomas, who had taken no notice till then, rose and came to the table on which the case of specimens stood. He looked at the spider of Guyana, and an expression of horror passed over his rubicund features.

“‘There,’ he said, ‘is the most hideous work of the Creator. I tremble only to look at it.’

“And, sure enough, a sudden pallor spread over his face.

“‘Bah!’ said my guardian, ‘all that is childish nonsense. You heard your nurse scream at a spider, you were frightened, and the impression has remained. But if you regard the creature with a strong microscope, you would be astonished at the delicacy of its organs, at their admirable arrangement, and even at their beauty.’

“‘It disgusts me,’ said the commodore, brusquely. ‘Pouff!’

“And he walked away.

‘I don’t know why,’ he continued, ‘but a spider always freezes my blood.’

“Dr. Weber burst out laughing, but I felt the same as Sir Thomas, and sympathized with him.

“‘Yes, cousin, take away that horrid creature,’ I cried. ‘It is frightful, and spoils all the others.’

“‘Little stupid,’ said he, while his eyes flashed, ‘nobody compels you to look at them. If you are not pleased you can go.’

“Evidently he was angry, and Sir Thomas, who was standing by the window regarding the mountains, turned suddenly round, and took me by the hand.

“‘Your guardian loves his spiders, Frantz,’ he said, kindly. ‘We prefer the trees and the grass. Come with me for a drive.’

“‘Yes, go,’ returned the doctor, ‘and be back to dinner at six.’ Then, raising his voice, ‘No offense, Sir Thomas,’ he said.

“Sir Thomas turned and laughed, and we went out to the carriage.

“The commodore decided to drive himself, and sent back his servant. He placed me on the seat beside him, and we started for Rothalps. While the carriage slowly mounted the sandy hill, I was quiet and sad. Sir Thomas, too, was grave, but my silence seemed to strike him.

“‘You don’t like the spiders, Frantz; neither do I. But, thank Heaven! there are no dangerous ones in this country. The spider your cousin has in his box is found in the swampy forests of Guyana, which is always full of hot vapors and burning exhalations, for it needs a high temperature to support its existence. Its immense web, or rather its net, would surround an ordinary thicket, and birds are caught in it, the same as flies in our spiders’ webs. But do not think any more about it; let us drink a glass of Burgundy.’

“As he spoke he lifted the cover of the seat, and, taking out a flask of wine, poured me out a full leathern goblet.

“I felt better when I had drunk it, and we continued our way. The carriage was drawn by a little Ardennes pony, which climbed the steep incline as lightly and actively as a goat. The air was full of the murmur of myriads of insects. At our right was the forest of Rothalps. At our left was the cascade of Spinbronn; and the higher we mounted, the bluer became the silver sheets of water foaming in the distance, and the more musical the sound as the water passed over the rocks.

“Both Sir Thomas and I were captivated by the spectacle, and, lost in a reverie, allowed the pony to go on as he would. Soon we were within a hundred paces of the cavern of Spinbronn. The shrubs around the entrance were remarkably green. The water, as it flowed from the cavern, passed over the top of the rock, which was slightly hollowed, and there formed a small lake, from which it again burst forth and descended into the valley below. This lake was shallow, the bottom of it composed of sand and black pebbles, and, although covered with a slight vapor, the water was clear and limpid as crystal.

“The pony stopped to breathe. Sir Thomas got out and walked about for a few seconds.

“ ‘How calm it is,’ he said.

“Then, after a minute’s silence, he continued: ‘Frantz, if you were not here, I should have a bathe in that lake.’

“ ‘Well, why not?’ I answered. ‘I will take a walk the while. There are numbers of strawberries to be found a little way up that mountain. I can go and get some, and be back in an hour.’

“ ‘Capital idea, Frantz. Dr. Weber pretends that I drink too much Burgundy; we must counteract that with mineral water. This little lake looks inviting.’

“Then he fastened the pony to the trunk of a tree, and waved his hand in adieu. Sitting down on the moss, he commenced to take off his boots, and, as I walked away, he called after me: “ ‘In an hour, Frantz.’

“They were his last words.

“An hour after I returned. The pony, the carriage, and Sir Thomas’s clothes were all that I could see. The sun was going down and the shadows were lengthening. Not a sound of bird or of insect, and a silence as of death filled the solitude. This silence frightened me. I climbed on to the rock above the cavern, and looked right and left. There was nobody to be seen. I called; no one responded. The sound of my voice repeated by the echoes filled me with terror. Night was coming on. All of a sudden I remembered the disappearance of Loisa Muller, and I hurried down to the front of the cavern. There I stopped in affright, and glancing toward the entrance, I saw two red, motionless points.

“A second later I distinguished some dark, moving object farther back in the cavern, farther perhaps than human eye had ever before penetrated; for fear had sharpened my sight, and given all my senses an acuteness of perception that I had never before experienced.

“During the next minute I distinctly heard the chirp, chirp of a grasshopper, and the bark of a dog in the distant village. Then my heart, which had been frozen with terror, commenced to beat furiously, and I heard nothing more. With a wild cry I fled, leaving pony and carriage.

“In less than twenty minutes, bounding over rocks and shrubs, I reached my cousin’s door.

“ ‘Run, run,’ I cried, in a choking tone, as I burst into the room where Dr. Weber and some invited friends were waiting for us. ‘Run, run; Sir Thomas is dead; Sir Thomas is in the cavern,’ and I fell fainting on the floor.

“All the village turned out to search for the commodore. At ten o’clock they returned, bringing back Sir Thomas’s clothes, the pony, and carriage. They had found nothing, seen nothing, and it was impossible to go ten paces into the cavern.

“During their absence Agatha and I remained in the chimney-corner, I still trembling with fear, she, with wide-open eyes, going from time to time to the window, from which we could see the torches passing to and fro on the mountain, and hear the searchers shout to one another in the still night air.

“At her master’s approach Agatha began to tremble. The doctor entered brusquely, pale, with set lips. He was followed by about twenty woodcutters, shaking out the last remnants of their nearly extinguished torches.

“He had barely entered before, with flashing eyes, he glanced round the room, as if in search of something. His eyes fell on the negress, and without a word being exchanged between them the poor woman began to cry.

“‘No, no, I will not,’ she shrieked.

“‘But I will,’ returned the doctor, in a hard tone.

“The negress shook from head to foot, as though seized by some invisible power. The doctor pointed to a seat, and she sat down as rigid as a corpse.

“The woodcutters, good, simple people, full of pious sentiments, crossed themselves, and I, who had never yet heard of the hypnotic force, began to tremble, thinking Agatha was dead.

“Dr. Weber approached the negress, and passed his hands over her forehead.

“‘Are you ready?’ he said.

“‘Yes, sir.

“‘Sir Thomas Haverbrook.’

“At these words she shivered again.

“‘Do you see him?’

“‘Yes, yes,’ she answered, in a gasping voice, ‘I see him.’ “‘Where is he?’

“‘Up there, in the depths of the cavern—dead!’

“‘Dead!’ said the doctor; ‘how?’

“‘The spider! oh, the spider!’

‘Calm yourself,’ said the doctor, who was very pale. ‘Tell us clearly.’

“‘The spider holds him by the throat—in the depths of the cavern—under the rock—enveloped in its web—Ah!’”

“Dr. Weber glanced round on the people, who, bending forward, with eyes starting out of their heads, listened in horror.

“Then he continued: ‘You see him?’

“‘I see him.’

“‘And the spider. Is it a big one?’

“‘O Master, never, never, have I seen such a big one. Neither on the banks of the Mocaris, nor in the swamps of Konanama. It is as large as my body.’

“There was a long silence. Everybody waited with livid face and hair on end. Only the doctor kept calm. Passing his hand two or three times over the woman’s forehead, he recommenced his questions. Agatha described how Sir Thomas’s death happened.

“‘He was bathing in the lake of the source. The spider saw his bare back from behind. It had been fasting for a long time, and was hungry. Then it saw Sir Thomas’s arm on the water. All of a sudden it rushed out, put its claws round the commodore’s neck. He cried out, “Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu.” The spider stung him and went back, and Sir Thomas fell into the water and died. Then the spider returned, spun its web round him, and swam slowly, gently back to the extremity of the cavern; drawing Sir Thomas after it by the thread attached to its own body.’

“I was still sitting in the chimney-corner, overwhelmed with fright. The doctor turned to me.

“ ‘Is it true, Frantz, that the commodore was going to bathe?’

“ ‘Yes, cousin.’

“ ‘At what time?’

“ ‘At four o’clock.’

“ ‘At four o’clock? It was very hot then, was it not?’

“ ‘Yes; oh, yes.’

“ ‘That’s it. The monster was not afraid to come out then.’

“He spoke a few unintelligible words, and turned to the peasants.

“ ‘My friends,’ he cried, ‘that is where the mass of debris and those skeletons come from. It is the spider that has frightened away your visitors and ruined you all. It is there hidden in its web, entrapping its prey into the depths of the cavern. Who can say the number of its victims?’

“He rushed impetuously from the house, and all the woodcutters hurried after him.

“ ‘Bring fagots, bring fagots!’ he cried.

Ten minutes later two immense carts, laden with fagots, slowly mounted the hill; a long file of woodcutters followed, with hatchets on their shoulders. My guardian and I walked in front, holding the horses by the bridle; while the moon lent a vague, melancholy light to the funereal procession.

At the entrance of the cavern the cortege stopped. The torches were lighted and the crowd advanced. The limpid water flowed over the sand, reflecting the blue light of the resinous torches, the rays of which illuminated the tops of the dark, overhanging pines on the rocks above us.

“ ‘It is here you must unload,’ said the doctor. ‘We must block up the entrance of the cavern.’

“ ‘It was not without a feeling of dread that they commenced to execute his order. The fagots fell from the tops of the carts, and the men piled them up before the opening, placing some stakes against them to prevent their being carried away by the water. Toward midnight the opening was literally closed by the fagots. The hissing water below them flowed right and left over the moss, but those on the top were perfectly dry.

“Then Dr. Weber took a lighted torch, and himself set fire to the pile. The flames spread from twig to twig, and rose toward the sky, preceded by dense clouds of smoke. It was a wild, strange sight, and the woods lighted by the crackling flames had a weird effect. Thick volumes of smoke proceeded from the cavern, while the men standing round, gloomy and motionless, waited with their eyes fixed on the opening. As for me, though I trembled from head to foot, I could not withdraw my gaze.

“We waited quite a quarter of an hour, and Dr. Weber began to be impatient, when a black object, with long, crooked claws, suddenly approached in the shadow, and then threw itself forward toward the opening. One of the men, fearing that it would leap over the fire, threw his hatchet, and aimed at the creature so well that, for an instant, the blood that flowed from its wound half quenched the fire, but soon the flame revived, and the horrible insect was consumed.

“Evidently driven by the heat, the spider had taken refuge in its den. Then, suffocated by the smoke, it had returned to the charge, and rushed into the middle of the flames. The body of the horrible creature was as large as a man’s, reddish violet in color, and most repulsive in appearance.

“That, Mr. Fritz, is the strange event that destroyed the reputation of Spinbronn. I can swear to the exactitude of my story, but it would be impossible for me to give you an explanation. Nevertheless, admitting that the high temperature of certain thermal springs furnishes the same conditions of existence as the burning climate of Africa and South America, it is not

unreasonable to suppose that insects, subject to its influences, can attain an enormous development.

“Whatever may have been the cause, my guardian decided that it would be useless to attempt to resuscitate the waters of Spinbronn; so he sold his house, and returned to America with his negress and his collection.”