

The Bear-Baiting

By Erckmann-Chatrian

“If any one thing distresses my dear aunt,” said Caspar, “more than my fondness for Sébaldus Dick’s tavern, it is that there is an artist in the family!

“Dame Catherine would have been glad to see me an advocate, a priest, or a councillor. If I had become a councillor, like Monsieur Andreas Van Berghem; if I had snuffled out long and weary sentences, caressing my lace bands with dainty finger-tips, with what esteem and veneration would not that worthy woman have regarded monsieur her nephew! She would have greeted Monsieur le Conseiller Caspar with profound respect; she would have set before me her best preserves, she would have poured out for me, in the midst of her circle of gossips, just a drop of—Muscadel of the year XI. with—

“Pray take this, monsieur le conseiller; I have but two bottles left!”

Anything that monsieur my nephew Caspar, conseiller at the court of justice, could do would certainly have been perfectly right and suitable, and quite perfect in its way.

Alas for the vanity of human wishes! the poor woman’s ambition was never to be gratified. Her nephew is plain Caspar—Caspar Diderich; he has no title, no wand of office, no big wig—he is just an artist! and Dame Catherine has running in her head the old proverb, “Beggarly as an artist,” which distresses her more than she can tell.

At first I used to try to make her understand that a true artist is worthy of great respect, that his works sometimes endure for ages, and are admired by many successive generations, and that, in point of fact, a good artist is quite as good as a councillor. Unhappily, I failed to convince her; she merely shrugged her shoulders, clasped her hands in despair, and vouchsafed no answer.

I would have done anything to convert my aunt Catherine to my views—anything; but I would rather die than sacrifice art and an artist’s life, music, painting, and Sébaldus’s tavern!

Sébaldus’s tavern is delightful. It is the corner house between the narrow Rue des Hallebardes and the little square De la Cigogne. As soon as you are through the archway you find within a spacious square court, with old carved wooden galleries all round it, and a wooden staircase to reach it; everywhere are scattered in disorder small windows of last century with leaden sashes, skylights, and air-holes; old wooden posts are nearly yielding under the weight of a roof that threatens to sink in. The barn, the rows of casks piled up in a corner, the cellar door at the left, a pigeon-cote forming the point of the gable end; then, again, beneath the galleries, other darkened windows in the same style, where you can see swillers and toppers in three-cornered hats, distinguished by noses red, purple, or crimson; little women of Hundsruock, in velvet caps with long fluttering ribbons, some grave, some laughing, others queer and grotesque-looking; the hay-loft high up under the roof; stables, pigsties, cow-sheds, all in picturesque confusion, attract and confound your attention. It is a strange sight!

For fifty years not a hammer has been lifted against this venerable ruin. You would think it was left for the special accommodation of rats! And when the glowing autumn sun, red as fire, showers golden rain upon the decaying walls and timbers; when, as daylight fades into evening, the angular projections stand out more boldly, and the shadows deepen; when all the tavern rings with songs, and shouts, and roars of laughter; when fat Sébaldus, in leathern apron, runs to and from the cellar with the big jug in his band; when his wife Gredel throws up the kitchen window, and with her long knife, well hacked along the edge, cleans the fish, or cuts the necks of hens,

ducks, or geese which struggle and gurgle in their own blood; when pretty Fridoline, with her rosy little mouth and her long fair hair, leans out of her window to tend the honeysuckle, and over her head the neighbour's tabby cat is gently swaying her tail and watching, with her cunning green eyes, the swallow circling in the deepening purple—I do assure you that a man must be utterly devoid of taste for the picturesque not to stop and contemplate in ecstasy and listen to the murmuring sounds, or the louder din, or the falling whispers, and observe with an artist's eye the trembling lights, the flying shadows, and whisper to himself, "Is not this beautiful?"

But you should see Maître Sébaldus's tavern on a great occasion, when all the jovial folks of Bergzabern crowd into the immense public room—some day when a cock-fight is going on, or a dog-fight, or a magic-lantern.

Last autumn, on a Saturday—and it was Michaelmas Day—we were all sitting round the oaken table, between one and two o'clock in the afternoon; old Doctor Melchior, Eisenloffel the blacksmith, and his old wife old Berbel Rasimus, Johannes the capuchin monk, Borves Fritz the clarinet-player at the Pied de Bœuf, and half a hundred more, laughing, singing, drinking, playing at *youker*, draining jugs and glasses, eating puddings and *amdouilles*.

Mother Gredel was coming and going; the pretty maid-servants, Heinrichen and Lotté, were flying up and down the kitchen stairs like squirrels, and outside, under the broad archway, was the booming, and banging, and jingling of the big drum and the cymbals, while the exciting proclamation was being made: "Ho! ho! hi! Great battle to come off! The Asturian bear, Beppo, and Baptist, the Savoyard bear, against all dogs that may come. Boom! boom! Walk in, ladies! Walk in, gentlemen! Here's the buffalo from Calabria, and the onagra of the desert! Walk in, walk in! Don't be frightened! All walk in!"

And they did come in, in crowds.

Sébaldus, barring the passage with his burly form, as Horatius guarded the bridge in the brave days of old, shouted to all—

"Your five kreutzers, friends and neighbours! Five kreutzers for admittance! Pay, or I'll throttle you!"

It was an awful confusion; people climbed over each other's backs to get in faster, until Bridget Kéra lost a stocking and Anna Seller half her petticoat.

About two, the bear-leader, a tall, rough-looking fellow, with red ragged hair and beard, and mounting a high sugar-loafed hat, pushed the door ajar, and cried, looking in—

"Just going to begin the fight!"

In an instant all the tables were emptied, many an untasted glass being left upon it. I ran to the hayloft, climbed up the ladder four steps at a time, and drew it up after me. There, seated all alone upon a bundle of hay, just inside the little skylight, I had a capital view.

What a throng! The old galleries were bending under their weight, the roofs were visibly swaying. I shuddered to think of what might happen. It seemed inevitable that they would all come down together like grapes in the wine-press, heaped up in a sea of heads.

They were hanging in clusters on the wooden pillars; yet higher in the gutters along the roof; yet higher about the pigeon-cote; higher still over the skylights in the roof of the *mairie*; yet higher in the spire of St. Christopher's; and all this multitude were bowling and shouting—

"The bears! the bears!"

When I had sufficiently admired and wondered at the immense crowd, looking down I saw in the middle of the court a poor, wretched, depressed-looking donkey, lean and ragged, his sleepy eyes half-closed, his ears hanging down. This dreadful object was to open the sports.

“What fools some people are!” I thought. Minutes were passing away, the tumult increased, impatience was waxing into anger, when the great red scoundrel, with his immense sugar-loaf hat, advanced carelessly into the middle of the open space, and cried solemnly, with his fist upon his hips—

“The onagra of the desert against any dog in the town!”

There was a silence of astonishment. Daniel, the butcher, with staring eyes and gaping mouth, asks—

“Where is the onagra?”

“There she stands!”

“That! why, it’s an ass!”

“It’s an onagra.”

“Well, let us see what it is,” cried the butcher, laughing.

He whistled his dog to come, and, pointing to the ass, cried—

“Foux, catch him!”

But, strange to say, as soon as the ass saw the dog running to the attack, he turned nimbly round, and launched out with the whole length of his leg—so well aimed a kick that the dog fell back as if struck by lightning, with his jaw fractured!

Loud laughter rang all round, while the poor dog fled with a piteous yell of pain.

The bear-leader smiled at the butcher, and asked—

“Well, what’s your opinion? Is my onagra an ass?”

“No,” said Daniel, rather ashamed, “it is an onagra.”

“All right! all right! any more dogs coming to fight my desert-born, desert-bred onagra? Come on, the onagra is ready!”

But no one came forward; and the bear-leader shouted in vain in his shrill tones—

“Gentlemen! ladies! are you all afraid? afraid of the onagra? The dogs of your town ought to be ashamed of themselves. Come on! courage, gentlemen! courage, ladies!”

But no one was inclined to risk his dog’s life or limbs against so dangerous an animal, and the cries for the bears were beginning again.

“The bears! the bears! bring out the bears!”

After waiting a quarter of an hour the fellow saw that his onagra was not likely to get any more customers, so, putting the beast up in the stable, he approached the pigsty, opened it, and drew out by his chain Baptiste, the Savoy bear, an old brute with a brown mangy-looking coat, as sulky and ashamed as a sweep coming down a chimney. For all he was not handsome the shouts of applause rang out, and the fighting dogs themselves, shut into the tavern porch, smelling a wild beast, set up a tragic howl that made your hair stand on end. The miserable bear was led quietly enough to a stake firmly driven in the ground, to which he was chained, all the time slowly surveying the excited crowd with a melancholy eye.

“Poor old traveller!” I cried to myself, “would anybody have told you ten years ago, when grave, terrible, and solitary you were traversing from side to side the high glaciers in Switzerland, in the gloomy glens of the Unterwald, and your deep growls made the old oaks tremble in every leaf—who could have told you that the day would come when, sad and resigned, with an iron collar round your throat, you would be tied to a post and devoured by dogs to amuse a mob at Bergzabern? Alas! *Sic transit gloria mundi!*”

As these meditations were occupying my thoughts, noticing that everybody was bending forward to see, I did like the rest, and I soon saw the possibility of warm work.

A pair of boar-hounds, belonging to old Heinrich, were being led to the other end of the court. Struggling in the chain, these ferocious creatures were foaming with rage. One was of the large Danish breed, white, with large black spots, supple of limb, with muscles like steel springs, jaws opening wide like an alligator's; the other a huge hound from the Tannewald, never disabled in one leg according to law, ribs barely covered, the backbone hard and knotted like a bamboo cane. They did not bark, but they were straining against the chain with all their might, and there stood old Heinrich with his grey broad head flung back, his ruddy moustache bristling, his thin razor-backed nose hooked over his lips, and his long leather-gaitered legs firmly planted against the stones in his strenuous efforts to restrain with both hands the eager appetite of his dogs for the fight, while he opposed to their attempts to bound forward the whole weight of his body.

"Back! back!" he shouted to the bear-leader, and the ruffian ran back to the shelter of a faggot-stack.

Then every face bending over the galleries grew red and hot with the excitement of the horrid fray, and starting eyes glanced from every nook and corner.

The bear sat on his haunches gathered together ready for action, his huge paws uplifted. I could see how he quivered in his rough skin, and his muzzle seemed to annoy him terribly. All at once the chain was slipped; at a single leap the hounds cleared the intervening space, and their sharp fangs were in a moment fixed in both poor Baptiste's ears, whose heavy paws and long sharp claws hugged each bitter enemy around the neck, slowly digging into their straining bodies till the blood spurted out in streams. But he, too, was bleeding, for his ears were suffering cruel lacerations; the dogs held on, and his tawny eyes were raised to the sky with a pitiable look of appeal. Not a cry, not a sigh or a groan escaped from a single combatant; the three animals formed a group as motionless as if they had been carved in wood.

I could feel the perspiration running down my face.

This went on for five minutes.

At length the Tannenthaler seemed to be relaxing slightly; the bear weighed more heavily on him with his heavy paw, his eye kindling with a gleam of hope; then there was another brief pause. There was a horrid groan, a cracking; the hound's backbone was broken, and he fell back upon the stones, his jaws reeking with blood.

Then Baptiste, with a tremor of delight, threw both paws round the Dane, who had not yet let go his hold, but his teeth were slipping from the torn and bloody ear. Suddenly he shook himself and sprang backward; the bear made a rush at his flying foe, but the chain held him back. The dog fled, red with blood, and only stopped when he had got safe behind his master, who gave him a favourable reception, while casting a glance at his other dog, which lay motionless.

And here Baptiste placed his mighty paw upon the victim of his fury and his valour; carrying his head high, he snuffed the carnage with distended nostrils and panting sides. The veteran warrior was himself again. Frantic applause rose from the galleries to the church spire. The bear seemed to understand. I have never seen a more proud and resolute bearing.

After this fight all the spectators were taking breath; the capuchin friar Johannes, seated upon the banister facing the field of battle, shook his stick, smiling with satisfaction in his long brown beard. People wanted a little relief; pinches of snuff were offered and accepted, and the voice of Doctor Melchior, discussing and explaining the different phases of the conflict, was heard over the noise of many talkers. But he had no time to finish his speech, for in a moment the barn-door flew open, and more than five-and-twenty dogs, great and small, the very vagrants and scum of the town, offered up as a sacrifice to do honour to the occasion, wallowed in a heap into the yard, howling and yelling, barking, snapping, and snarling; then, as if second thoughts had rather

modified their ideas about valour, they all retreated into a safe corner of the yard, the farthest from the bear, where they contented themselves with angry protests, making short runs at the enemy and quick retreats, making a very sorry pretence of war.

“Oh, those cowardly curs! the miserable little brutes!” cried the valorous occupants in the gallery.

And the much wiser and discreeter dogs looked up in answer, and seemed to say—

“Go yourselves!”

Still the bear was standing well on the defensive when, to the general astonishment, Heinrich reappeared, holding his Danish hound by the chain.

I have since been informed that he had wagered fifty forms with Joseph Kilian, the gamekeeper, that the boar-hound would renew the attack. He advanced slowly, patting the dog with his hand, and saying persuasively—

“Good dog, Blitz! good dog!”

And the noble animal, in spite of his bleeding wounds, rushed in; then the whole pack of mongrels, curs, puppies, lurchers, and turnspits ran in too in a long string, till poor Baptiste was covered with the vile rabble rout; he did what he could, he rolled over and over as far as his chain would let him, growling and grunting, crushing one, sending another away with a bite, struggling furiously. The brave Dane still showed the greatest intrepidity; he had caught the bear between the ears, and rolled over with him, his fore-legs in the air, whilst the rest were biting, some his legs, and some his torn and bleeding ears. There seemed no end to this plague of dogs.

“Enough! enough!” was the cry in every direction. Yet still some were not satisfied, and kept crying on the dogs.

Heinrich at that moment darted across the yard like a flash of lightning; he seized his dog by the ear, and pulling it away with all his strength, cried—

“Blitz, Blitz, let go!”

But this was of no use. At last the man succeeded in making him loose his hold by a tremendous cut with his whip across his body, and, dragging the animal away, they both disappeared under the archway.

The mongrels had not waited for this event to give up the battle; four or five only still hung upon Bruin’s side; the rest, scared, limping, yelping, were trying to find a way out. Suddenly one of those heroes, a cur belonging to Rasimus, caught sight of the kitchen window, and, fired by a noble enthusiasm for his safety, he crashed through glass and all. All the rest of the yelling crew, struck by the ingenuity of this plan, followed in the same road without a moment’s hesitation. Plates and dishes, glasses and bottles, saucepans and kettles were all heard making a fearful clatter, while Mother Gredel rent the air with her piercing cries of “Help, help!”

This was the best joke of the day. Roars of laughter hailed the propitious escape of the dogs, even at the cost of so much good crockery. They laughed till the tears came into their eyes, and rolled down their red faces, and they panted for breath.

In a quarter of an hour there came a lull; then people began to think it was time for the terrible bear from Asturias to make his appearance.

“The Asturian bear! the Spanish bear!” was the cry.

The bear-leader made signs to the people to be quiet, as he had something to say to them. It was impossible! The cries and the uproar redoubled.

“The bear of Asturias! the bear of Asturias!”

Then the fellow muttered a few unintelligible words, unfastened the brown bear, and took it back into its den; then with every appearance of precaution he loosened the door of the pigsty

and took the end of a chain which was lying on the ground. A formidable growling was heard inside. The man quickly passed the chain through a ring in the wall and fled, crying—

“Now, you there, let the dogs go!”

Immediately a black bear, low, and almost stunted in its stature, with a low forehead, ears wide apart, eyes red as fire, and glowing with a fierce sullen passion, hurled himself out into the open, and finding the chain fast in the wall, howled furiously. Evidently this was a bear of the most deplorably low moral character! Moreover, he had been roused to madness by the noise of the preceding combats, and his master had good reason for not trusting himself much to him.

“Let go the dogs!” cried the bear-leader, putting his head out of the granary skylight; “let them loose!”

Then he added—

“If you are not satisfied this time it won’t be my fault. There will be a battle now!”

At that moment Ludwig Karl’s big mastiff and Fischer de Heischland’s pair of wolf-hounds, with tails low, hair straight and smooth, heads advanced and ears erect, came into the court together.

The heavy-headed mastiff calmly yawned as he stretched his sinewy legs and caved in his long back. But after a long and leisurely yawn he slowly turned round, and catching sight of the bear he stood immovable as if stupefied. The bear, too, fixed his vicious glowing eyes upon him with ears expanded and his huge claws indenting the ground under them.

The wolf-hounds drew up as reserves in the rear of the mastiff.

Then such silence fell upon all that excited multitude that a dead leaf might have been heard rustling to the ground; but there followed a deep, low, fierce growl, like a coming thunderstorm, which sent a shudder through the crowd.

Suddenly the mastiff sprang forward, the two others followed, and then for several seconds nothing was seen but a confused mass rolling round the chain, then blood and entrails mingled flowing over the stones, then the bear rising on his haunches hugging the mastiff between his terrible claws, swaying to and fro his heavy head for a moment and gaping wide with his crimson jaws, for the muzzle was gone; in the struggle it had fallen off!

Then a low but rising cry of fear passed over the crowd in the galleries. No applause now, only a well-grounded alarm! The mastiff was in the agonies of death, with a rattling in his throat; the wolf-hounds lay torn and dead on the bloodstained earth; in the stables all round the court long agitated roaring and bellowing betrayed the terror of the cattle, whose kicking and plunging made the walls shake; but the bear never stirred: he seemed to be enjoying the universal alarm.

But in this predicament was heard a slight but tin-mistakable cracking like timber giving way, then more cracks; the old rotten galleries were beginning to yield under the heavy pressure of the crowd; and there was in this noise, just heard in the midst of the dead silence of suspense, something so dreadful that I, in my place of safety, felt a cold shiver pass over me. Taking a rapid survey of the galleries before me, I saw every face changed in colour, pale with a bluish, ashy paleness; some open-mouthed, others with bristling hair, listening intently, holding their breath. The capuchin friar Johannes seated on the banister had turned from crimson to a greenish hue, and the big red nose of Doctor Melchior had turned from red to sallow the first time for twenty years; the poor little women trembled without stirring from their places, knowing that the least agitation would bring down the whole place.

I could have wished to fly too. I fancied I could see the thick oaken pillars of the gallery bowing to the ground. I cannot tell whether this was illusion or not, but in a moment the principal beam gave a loud crack and became depressed by three inches at the least. Then, my friends, it

was horrible to behold—the deep silence of a minute before was succeeded by tumult, cries, screams, and ravings. That mass of human beings heaped up in the galleries, one above another, were some clutching the walls, the pillars, the banisters; others were fighting with fury, and even biting, to get away faster, and from the midst of this frightful confusion arose the plaintive voices of the suffering women. I shudder at the remembrance. Oh, may I never see such a sight as this again!

But, most terrible circumstance of all, the bear was chained close by the staircase that leads up to the galleries!



“The bear was chained close by the staircase.”

If I were to live a thousand years never should I forget the horror of Friar Johannes, who had cleared a way for himself with his long staff, and was placing his foot on the last step when he discovered, just before the bottom of the staircase, Beppo seated calmly on his tail, his chain tightened, his eye expressive of joy, ready to snap him up first!

None can tell the muscular power which Maître Johannes was obliged to put forth to stem the force that was driving him in from behind. Convulsively grasping the banister with both hands, his broad shoulders formed a mighty buttress against the pressing flood. Like Atlas, I do believe he would have borne the earth upon his back to save his precious skin.

In the midst of this confusion and tumult, and when there seemed no way to avert the threatening catastrophe, suddenly the door of the cattle-shed opened violently, and the redoubtable Horni, Maître Sébaldus’s magnificent bull, rushed into the arena, his massive

dewlap shaking loosely like an apron, his tail extended straight, his mouth and nostrils white with fleecy foam.

It was an inspiration of the master's. He had resolved to risk his bull to save human life. At the same moment the fat, round, rosy face of our landlord appeared through the skylight of the stable, crying to the crowd not to be alarmed, for that he would open the inner door which abuts into the old synagogue, and let out the crowd by the Jews' street, which was done in two or three minutes, to the immense relief and comfort of the public.

But now listen to the end of my story.

Scarcely had the bear caught sight of the bull when he made an ugly rush upon this new adversary with so terrible a shock that the chain burst. The bull retired, facing his foe, to a corner of the court near the pigeon-cote, and there, head well down between his short legs and horns presented, he awaited the shock of war.

The bear made several feints, slipping along by the wall from right to left; but the bull, with his forehead almost touching the ground, followed the enemy's movements with marvellous coolness.

In five minutes the galleries had been cleared; the noise of the crowd taking refuge down the Jews' street was becoming more remote, and this manœuvring of the two huge brutes seemed as if they were meditating a drawn battle, when suddenly the bull, losing patience, threw himself upon the bear with the whole momentum of his monstrous bulk. The unhappy brute, pressed so closely, took refuge under the wood-shed, but the head and horns of his foe pursued him thither, and there no doubt he nailed his adversary to the wall, for although I could only see the bull's hind-quarters, I could hear a dreadful shriek, followed by a crunching of bones, and presently a pool of blood was flowing over the pavement.

I could only see the bull's hind-quarters and his tail waving aloft like a battle-flag. You would have thought he wanted to bring the walls down by the furious and violent pounding of his hind-feet. That silent scene in shadow was fearful. I did not wait to see the end. I came carefully down my ladder, and slipped out of the court like a thief. You may imagine with what pleasure I inhaled the pure open air; and passing through the crowd collected round the door where the bear-leader was tearing his hair in his wild despair, I ran off to my aunt's house.

I was just going round under the arcades when I was stopped by my old drawing-master, Conrad Schmidt.

"Caspar!" he cried, "where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I am going to paint the great bear-fight!" I answered enthusiastically.

"Another tavern scene, I suppose," he remarked with a shrug.

"Why not, Master Conrad? Is not a tavern scene as good as one in the forum?"

I would have said a good deal, but we were standing at his door.

"Good night, Maître Conrad," I cried, pressing his hand. "Don't bear a grudge against me for not going to study in Italy."

"Grudge! No," replied the old master, smiling. "You know that privately I am of your opinion. If I tell you now and then to go to Italy, it is to satisfy Dame Catherine. But follow out your own idea, Caspar. Men who only follow other men's ideas never do any good."