

The Scapegoat

By Erckmann-Chatrian

NOTE

This story, allowing for the exercise of fancy in its construction, is only too faithful a picture of German student life and habits, with its ignorance or disregard of the Christianity taught us in the Gospel, its only half-concealed leaning towards the ancient systems of religion properly known as heathen, and its careless indifference to human life. The translator has ventured to deviate slightly from the original in one or two places in order to avoid giving an unnecessary shock to the susceptibilities of readers trained and educated in principles widely differing from these—*Transl.*

Doesn't everybody at Tübingen know the lamentable history of the quarrel between the Seigneur Kaspar Evig and the young Jew Elias Hirsch? Kaspar Evig was courting Mademoiselle Eva Salomon, the daughter of the old picture-dealer in the Rue de Jericho. One day he found my friend Elias in the broker's shop, and, on what pretext I know not, he boxed his ears soundly three or four times.

Elias Hirsch, who had begun his medical studies only about five months before, was called upon by a council of the students to challenge the Seigneur Kaspar to fight, a step which he took with the greatest repugnance, for it was quite to be expected that a seigneur should be a perfect swordsman.

For all that Elias put himself well on the defensive, and, watching his opportunity, inserted his finely-pointed sword so neatly between the ribs of the above-mentioned seigneur as considerably to affect his breathing, the consequence of which was that he was dead in ten minutes.

The Rector Diemer, being informed of this transaction by credible witnesses, listened coldly and remarked briefly—

“I understand you, gentlemen. He is dead, is he? Very well, then; bury him.”

Elias was carried about in triumph, like another Mattathias; but, far from accepting the proffered glory, he drooped under a profound melancholy.

He lost flesh, he sighed, he groaned; his nose, already a pretty long one, seemed to gain in prominence what it lost in solidity, and often in the evening, as he was passing down the Rue des Trois Fontaines, he might be heard murmuring—

“Kaspar Evig, forgive me; I did not mean to take your life. Oh, unhappy Eva! what have you done? By your thoughtless flirting you made two brave men quarrel, and now the shade of the Seigneur Kaspar pursues me everywhere, even in my sleep. Oh, Eva! wretched Eva! why did you behave so?”

So poor Elias moaned in his misery; and he was the more to be pitied because the sons of Israel are not bloodthirsty, and they know it is written in their law, “Whosoever sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed.”

Now one fine day in July, while I was drinking at the Faucon, in walks Elias Hirsch, just as miserable as ever, with hollow cheeks, hair hanging in disorder about his face, and downcast eyes. He laid his hand upon my shoulder, and said—

“Dear Christian, will you do me a pleasure?”

“Of course I will, Elias; only say what.”

“Let us go for a walk together in the country; I want to consult you about my grief. You know many things human and divine; perhaps you can point me out a remedy for so much trouble of mind. I can trust in you, Christian, entirely.”

As I had already had five or six pints of beer and two or three glasses of schnapps, there was nothing more to detain me, and I consented to go with him. Besides, I felt flattered with his confidence in my wisdom.

So we came through the town, and in twenty minutes we were walking along the little violet-bordered path which winds up to the ancient ruins of Triefels.

Then, feeling alone, passing between hedges balmy with honeysuckle and musical with the song of birds, and slowly climbing up to the lofty pines which crown the Rothalp, Elias breathed more freely; he raised his eyes and cried—

“In all your theological studies, Christian, have you met with a way in which great crimes may be expiated? I know that you have studied this question a good deal. Tell me. Whatever you recommend to put to flight the avenging shade of Kaspar Evig, I will do it.”

Hirsch’s question made me thoughtful. We walked together, with heads bowed down in thought, in deep silence. He watched me, I could see, out of the corner of his eye, whilst I was endeavouring to collect my thoughts upon this delicate question, but at last I made answer—

“Now, if we were inhabitants of India, Elias, I should tell you to go and bathe in the Ganges, for the waters of that river wash away the pollutions of both body and soul—so, at least, the people of that country think; and they kill, and burn, and steal without fear under the protection of that marvellous river. It is a great comfort for scoundrels! It is a matter of great regret that we have no such river! If we were living in the days of Jason, I should prescribe to you the salt-cakes of Queen Circe, which had the remarkable property of whitening blackened consciences and saving people the trouble of repenting. Finally, if you had the happiness to belong to our holy religion, I would order you to have masses said, and to give up your goods to the Church. But in your state as to locality, time, and belief, I know of only one way to relieve you.”

“What is it?” cried Hirsch, already kindling with hope.

We had now reached the Rothalp, and were standing in a lonely place called the Holderloch. It is a deep dark gorge, encircled with gloomy firs; a level rock crowns the abyss, whence fall the dark waters of the Marg with roaring deep and loud.

Our path had brought us there. I sat down upon the mossy turf to breathe the moist air which rises from the gulf, and at that very moment I espied below me a magnificent goat, reaching up to crop the wild cresses that grow on the edge of the cliff.

Let it be remembered that the rocks of the Holderloch rise in the form of successive terraces, each terrace ten feet high perhaps, but not more than a foot wide, and upon these little narrow ledges grow a thousand sweet-smelling plants—thyme and honeysuckle, ivy and convolvulus, and the wild vine, perpetually bedewed with the spray from the falling torrent, and falling over in the loveliest clusters of bloom and foliage.

Now my goat—an animal with a broad brow, garnished with heavy knotted curling horns, with eyes gleaming like a pair of gold buttons, a reddish beard, exhibiting a proud, defiant bearing under those festoons of verdure, and a countenance as bold as that of a prowling satyr—my goat was making a progress upwards towards the very highest of these narrow ledges, and was enjoying a sweet repast of dainty herbs.

“Elias!” I cried, “I feel an inspiration! Just as I was thinking of a scapegoat, there is one! I see it! Look!—behold! There he is! Is not your course plain now? Lay your crime upon that goat, and then forget all about it.”

Elias looked at me in stupid ignorance.

“I should like to do that, Christian, but how am I to lay my remorse upon that goat?”

“Nothing can be plainer. What did the Romans do to get rid of their criminals, polluted with every crime? Why they flung them off the Tarpeian rock, to be sure. Well, having laid your imprecations upon that goat, fling him down the Holderloch, and there will be an end of it all.”

“But”—replied Elias.

“I know your objections beforehand,” I replied. “You are going to say that you see no connection between Kaspar Evig, whose shade follows you, and that goat. But beware! be careful! Where was the connection between the waters of the Ganges, Circe’s salt-cakes, and the scapegoat with the crimes to be expiated? None at all. Well, for all that, the expiation was held to be good; therefore lay your curses and imprecations upon that goat, and throw him over! I order you to do that! I feel it my duty to see this thing done. I can see a connection between that goat and your fault, but I cannot explain it because the light of my vast information dazzles me just now!”

Elms did not move a step. I even thought I detected a smile upon his countenance, which irritated me.

“How!” said I; “here am I pointing out to you an infallible method to get rid of the just punishment of your crime, and you doubt—you hesitate—you even smile!”

“No,” said he, “but I am not accustomed to walk on the edges of precipices, and I am afraid I should fall into the Holderloch along with the goat.”

“Ah, you are a coward! I can see it all. You have just once displayed a little courage to get exemption for the rest of your days. Well, sir, if you refuse to carry out my advice, I will do it myself.”

And I rose.

“Christian! Christian!” cried my friend, “don’t trust yourself too far. Your foot is not steady—just now.”

“My foot not steady! Do you dare to insinuate that I am drunk because I have just had ten or a dozen glasses of beer and three glasses of schnapps this morning? Away with you! Back! back, son of Belial!”

And advancing a few feet above the goat, with my head raised and hands extended, I cried solemnly—

“Azazel! goat destined for misery and expiation, I lay upon your hairy back the remorse of my friend Elias Hirsch, and I send you down to the spirits of darkness!”

Then, passing round the ledge on which we stood, I descended to the next below to catch the goat and throw him over.

A sacred rage and fury seemed to possess me. I took no notice of the abyss. I stepped along the edge of the precipice like a cat.

The goat, perceiving my approach, eyed me suspiciously, and stepped back a little way.

“Ha!” I cried, “you may flee from me, but you shall not escape from me, accursed beast! I have got you!”

“Oh, Christian, Christian!” Elias kept repeating in a heartrending voice, “do come back. You are risking your life!”

“Silence, unbeliever!” I cried. “You are unworthy of the great sacrifice which I am making for your happiness! But your friend Christian never draws back. Azazel must perish!”

A little farther on the ledge narrowed and ended in a point.

The goat, having a second time examined me with a curious eye, drew back a little farther, but not without some hesitation.

“Aha!” I exclaimed, “you are beginning to understand what is going to happen. Yes, let me get you into that corner, and your doom is sealed!”

And undoubtedly, when he had got to the spot where the ledge came to an end, Azazel seemed puzzled to know what to do next. I edged up to him closer and closer, full of a noble excitement, and laughing in anticipation at the coming descent and the splash in the torrent below.

I now beheld him at four paces from me, and I was grasping tightly a root of holly that was growing out of a rock to launch out a kick at the devoted beast.

“Look, Elias, see the accursed!” I cried.

When, all in a moment, I felt in my stomach a most awful blow, a butt which would have sent *me* into the Holderloch had I not kept hold of that blessed root of holly. The fact was that that miserable goat, seeing himself driven into a corner, had himself commenced the attack.

Oh, what was my astonishment! Before I knew where I was or what had happened, there was the brute standing up again on his hind-legs, and his horns digging into my stomach and my sides with a hollow sound.

What a position to be in! It is impossible to be more astounded than I was at that moment! It was the world upside down. It was a bad dream—a nightmare! The precipice with all its jagged peaks seemed to dance around me, and so did the trees and sky above. At the same moment I heard piercing cries from Elias of “Help! help!” while Azazel’s horns were ploughing up my sides.

Then I lost all presence of mind. The goat with his long beard and his hard, sharp horns pounding me, now in my chest, now in my stomach, and then in my shaking limbs, produced a most diabolical effect upon me. My hold on the root slowly relaxed, and I let go. But happily something kept me from falling, something which I could not understand at first. But it was the shepherd Yeri, of the Holderloch, who from the next platform above had caught me by the coat-collar with his crook.

Thanks to his assistance, instead of falling down into the chasm I lay full length along the ledge, and that awful goat walked over my body to get away about his business.

“Come, take firm hold of my crook,” cried the shepherd to Elias; “now I will go down for him. Don’t let go!”

“You may rely upon me,” answered Elias.

I heard all that as if it were a nightmare. I had almost lost consciousness.

When I opened my eyes I saw standing before me that gigantic shepherd, with his grey eyes sunk underneath his bushy eyebrows, his yellow beard, a sheepskin thrown over his shoulders, and I thought I had awoke in the age of *Œdipus*, which made me wonder a good deal.

“Well,” cried the shepherd, in a harsh guttural, “this will teach you not to curse my goat any more

Then I saw Azazel rubbing himself comfortably against his master’s colossal legs, and looking slyly, and I thought ironically, at me; and then I saw Elias standing behind me, and making the greatest efforts not to laugh.

My scattered senses were beginning to return. I sat myself down with pain and difficulty, for Azazel had bruised me all over, and I felt fearfully stiff and sore.

“Was it you who saved me?” I asked the shepherd.

“Yes, my boy, it was.”

“Well, you are a good fellow, and I am much obliged to you. I withdraw the curse I laid upon your goat. Here, take this.”

I handed him my purse with sixteen forms in it.

“Thank you, sir,” said he, “and now you can begin again if you like on even ground. Down there it was not fair; the goat had all the advantage.”

“Thank you very much! But I have had quite enough. Shake hands, old fellow; I’ll never forget you. Let us go now.”

My comrade and I, arm-in-arm, then descended the hill. The shepherd, leaning on his crook, watched us till we disappeared. The goat had resumed his walk and his supper on the very edge of the crags. The sky was lovely, the air balmy with a thousand sweet mountain perfumes carried on it with the distant sounds of the shepherd’s horn and the booming of the torrent.

We returned to Tübingen with our hearts full.

Since that time my friend Elias has found some comfort for slaying the Seigneur Kaspar, but in an original fashion.

Scarcely had he taken his doctor’s degree when he married Mademoiselle Eva Salomon, with the hope of having a numerous family to make up for the loss of that individual who had met with an untimely end at his hand.

Four years ago I was at his wedding as best man, and already there are two fat babies making the pretty little house in Crispin-street to rejoice.

This was a promising commencement!

Don’t let me be misunderstood. I don’t pretend to say that the method I prescribed for making expiation for taking away a life is better than that taught in our holy religion, which, according to the Catholic Church, consists in masses and in giving away your goods to the Church. But I do think it better than the Hindoo practice, and I think the theory of the famous scapegoat is not to be compared with that which is taught us by pure religion.