

A Night in the Woods

By Erckmann-Chatrian

CHAPTER I.

My worthy uncle, Bernard Hertzog, the historian and antiquary, surmounted with his grand three-cornered hat and wig, and with a long iron-shod mountain-pole firmly grasped in his hand, was coming down one evening by the Luppensberg, hailing every turn in the landscape with enthusiastic exclamations.

Years had never quenched in him the love of knowledge. At sixty he was still at work upon his *History of Alsacian Antiquities*, and never allowed himself to write a complete account of a ruined and defaced monument, or any relic of former days, until he had examined it a hundred times from every point of view.

“No man,” said he, “who has had the happy privilege of being born in the Yosges, between Haut Bar, Nideck, and Geierstein has any business to think of travelling. Where are there nobler forests, older fir and beech trees, more lovely smiling valleys, wilder rocks? Where is the country with richer possessions in memorable story? Here, in olden times, used the high and powerful lords of Lutzstein, Dagsberg, Leiningen, and Fénétrange, to fight clad in mail from head to foot. Here the eldest son of the Church and the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire exchanged blows in the Middle Ages with swords two yards long. What are our wars compared with those terrible battles where warriors fought hand to hand, where they hammered upon each other’s skulls with huge battle-axes, and drove the dagger between the bars of the closed visor? Were not those heroic feats of arms? was not that a courage worthy to be chronicled to all posterity? But our young people want to see new things; they are not satisfied with their own native land: they must wander through Germany, make tours in France. Worse still, they abandon science and its noble fields for trade, arts, industry, as if there had not been in the former glorious days much more curious industrial arts and pursuits than in our own day! Witness the Hanseatic League, the maritime enterprise of Venice, Genoa, and the Levant, Flemish manufactures, Florentine art, the triumphs in art of Rome and Antwerp! No! all that is laid aside; people now-a-days pride themselves upon their ignorance of those glorious days; above all, they neglect our dear old Alsace. Now, candidly, Theodore, don’t all those tourists remind you of husbands leaving their fair sweet lawful wives to run after ugly coquettes?”

And Bernard Hertzog shook his learned head, his eyes rounded with wonder and excitement, just as if he had been standing before the ruins of Babylon.

His partiality to the usages and customs of old times accounted for his having, for forty years past, worn the full-skirted plush coat, the velvet breeches, the black silk stockings, and the silver shoe-buckles of our grandfathers. He would have thought himself disgraced had he put on trousers; and to cut off his pigtail would have been a profane deed.

So the worthy chronicler was going to Haslach on the 3rd of July, 1835, to examine with his own eyes a little bronze Mercury recently unearthed in the old cloister of the Augustins.

He trotted on with a tolerably elastic step under a burning sun. Mountains succeeded mountains, valleys sank into other valleys, the footpath went up, then went down again, turned now to the right, now to the left, until Maitre Hertzog began to wonder how it was that he had not caught sight of the village spire an hour ago.

The fact was that after leaving Saverne he had inclined to the right, and was now penetrating into the Dagsberg woods with juvenile energy. At the rate he was going, in five or six hours he would have reached Phramond, eight leagues from his destination. But night was coming on apace, and the path was now becoming fainter, and under the tall trees only an indistinct track appeared.

The approach of night among the mountains is a melancholy sight; the shadows lengthen in the valleys, the sun withdraws, one by one, his rays from the darkening foliage, the silence deepens every minute. You look behind you; the groups and clumps of trees assume colossal proportions; a blackbird at the summit of a tree bids farewell to the parting day, then silence covers all like a funeral pall. You can only hear now the last year's dead leaves crisping under foot, and far, far, away a waterfall filling the valley with its monotonous hum. Bernard Hertzog began to pant a little; his clothes adhered to his skin with the running perspiration. His legs were beginning to give hints of surrendering.

"Confound that foolish Mercury!" he cried. "At this moment I ought to have been quiet at home in my own armchair, and Berbel, according to her praiseworthy custom, ought to be bringing me up upon a tray a cup of smoking hot coffee, while I am winding up my chapter upon the ancient armoury at Nideck. Instead of which, here I am floundering in holes, stumbling everywhere, and suppose I lost my way altogether and then broke my neck! There!—I said so! Was that a tree I knocked against? A hundred thousand bans and maledictions fall upon Mercury and Haas, the architect, who sent for me to look at it! and the scoundrels, too, who dug it up! I'll lay any wager that the boasted Mercury is nothing but some defaced and corroded bit of stone, without either nose or legs—some shapeless deformity like that little Hesus last year at Marienthal. Oh, you architects! you architects!—you are always finding antiquities everywhere. Luckily I had not my spectacles on, or I should have smashed them against that tree; but now I shall be obliged to find a bed somewhere among the bushes. What a road this is!—nothing but ruts, and holes, and pits, and loose rocks and boulders!"

In one of those moments when the good man, getting exhausted, was stopping for breath, he thought he could hear the grating of a saw far down the valley.

What was his joy when he became certain that it was that!

"Heaven be praised!" he cried, plucking up his spirits; "now to push on with halting steps. Now I shall get a little rest. What a lesson this will be for me! Providence had compassion upon my rheumatism. What an old fool to go and expose myself to have to lie out in the woods at my time of life, to ruin my health and undermine my constitution! I shall remember this! Never shall I forget this warning!"

In a quarter of an hour the noise of falling water became more distinct; then a faint light broke through the trees. Maitre Bernard then found himself at the top of the wood; he observed below the heath a stream running down the winding valley as far as he could see, and just before him the saw-mill, with its long dark posts and beams crossing and recrossing in the gloom like a huge spider.

He crossed the high-arched bridge over the rushing dam, and looked through the little window into the woodman's hut.

It was a low, dark shed leaning against a hollow in the rock. At the farther end of the natural cavity was a small pile of smouldering sawdust. In the front the boarded roof weighted with heavy stones, descended to within three feet of the ground; in a corner at the right, a kind of box, full of dried heather; a few logs of oak, an axe, a massive bench, and other implements of toil,

were lost in the shade. A resinous odour of pine-wood impregnated the air, and the ruddy smoke eddied through a fissure in the rock.

Whilst the good man was observing these objects, the woodman, coming out from the mill, saw him, and cried—

“Halloo!—who is that?”

“I beg your pardon; pray pardon me,” said my worthy uncle, rather startled. “I am a traveller who has lost his way.”

“Hey!” cried the other man; “good guide us! Is not that Maître Bernard, of Saverne? You are very welcome indeed, Maître Bernard. Don’t you know me?”

“No, indeed! How should I in this dark night?”

“*Parbleu!*—of course not! But I am Christian; I bring you your contraband snuff every fortnight. But come in, come in! We will soon get a light.”

They passed stooping under the little low door, and the woodman, having lighted a pine-torch, stuck it into a split iron rod to serve as a candlestick, and a bright light, clear and white as moonshine, filled the hut, lighting up every corner of it.

Christian, standing in shirt-sleeves, his broad chest uncovered, and with a pair of canvas trousers hitched up about his hips, looked a good-natured fellow enough; his tawny beard came down in a point to his waist; his huge bull head was covered with bristling brown hair; his small grey eyes inspired confidence.

“Take a seat, master,” he said, rolling a log of wood before the fire. “Are you hungry?”

“Why, you know, my lad, your mountain air does excite one’s appetite.”

“Very well; you are just in time. I have got some very good potatoes quite at your service.”

At the mention of potatoes Uncle Bernard could not help grimacing; he remembered, with the longing of affection, old Berbel’s good suppers, and had a difficulty in coming down to the humble realities before him.

Christian seemed to take no notice; he took five or six potatoes out of a sack, and put them into the embers, taking care to cover them entirely; then, sitting down on the hearthstone, he lighted his pipe.

“But just tell me, master, how is it that you are here to-night, at six leagues’ distance from Saverne, in the gorge of Nideck?”

“The gorge of Nideck!” cried my uncle Bernard, springing from his seat in great surprise.

“To be sure! You may see the ruins from here, about two gunshots distant.”

Master Bernard looked out, and really did recognise the ruins of Nideck, just as he had described them in the twenty-fourth chapter of his *History of Alsacian Antiquities*, with their high towers crumbling away at the foot, and dominating over the abyss into which the torrent falls.

“But I thought I was near Haslach!” he cried with amazement.

The woodcutter burst out laughing.

“Haslach!—you are two leagues away from it! I see how it is. You went wrong at the old oak-tree. You took the right instead of the left path. When you are in the woods you must look well about you. A few yards wrong at starting come to leagues at the end!”

Bernard Hertzog at this discovery was in consternation.

“Six leagues from Saverne,” he murmured, “and all mountains!—and if I have to go two more tomorrow, that will be eight!”

“Oh, don’t mind that! I will guide you to the road down the valley. And don’t forget. You are very fortunate.”

“Fortunate? You are joking with me, Christian.”

“Yes, you are lucky. You might have had to spend the night in the woods. There is a thunderstorm coming on from Schnéeberg; if that had overtaken you you might have had some reason to complain, with the rain at your back and thunder and lightning all round. But now you shall sleep in a good bed,” pointing to the box in the corner; “you will sleep there like a log, and to-morrow, when the sun is up, we will start; you will be rested, and you will get there in very good time.”

“You are very kind, Christian,” said Uncle Bernard with tears in his eyes. “Give me a potato, and then I will go to bed. I am more tired than anything else. I am not hungry. One hot potato will be quite enough for me.”

“Here is a couple as mealy as chestnuts. Taste that, master; take a small glass of kirschwasser, and then lie down. I have to set to work again. I have got to saw fifteen more planks before I can go to bed.”

Christian rose, set the bottle of kirschwasser on the window-sill, and went out. The alternate movement of the saw, which had for a time ceased, now recommenced amidst the rushing of the stream.

Maître Hertzog, astonished as he was to find himself in those remote solitudes between Dagsberg and the ruins of Nideck, sat long meditating what he must do to rejoin his household gods; then, gliding down the stream of his usual meditations, he went over the fabulous, heroic, or barbarous legends and chronicles of the former lords of that land, he went back to the Tribocci, that German nation settled about Strasbourg, remembering Clovis, Chilperic, Theodoric, Dagobert, the furious struggle between Brunehaut, Queen of Austrasia, and Frédégonde, queen of Chilperic of France, and many heroes and heroines besides. All these fierce personages passed in review before his eyes. The vague murmuring of the trees, the inky blackness of the rocks, favoured this strange invocation. All the distinguished personages of his chronicle were there, and the boar, and the wolf and the bear were among them.

At last, unable to hold out any longer, the good man hung his three-cornered hat upon a peg in the wall and lay down upon the heath. The cricket sang its monotonous song upon the hearth, a few surviving sparks were running hither and thither in the smouldering fire, his eyelids dropped, and he slept a deep, sound sleep.

CHAPTER II.

Maître Bernard Hertzog had slept a couple of hours, and the boiling of the water in the millrace alone competed with the noise of his loud snoring, when suddenly a guttural voice, arising in the midst of the deep silence, cried—

“Dröckteufel! Dröckteufel! have you forgotten everything?”

The voice was so piercing that Maître Bernard, waking with a sudden start, felt his hair creeping with horror. He raised himself upon his elbow and listened again with eyes starting with astonishment. The hut was as dark as a cellar; he listened, but not a breath, not a sound, came; only far away, far beyond the ruins, a dull, distant roar was heard among the mountains.

Bernard, with neck outstretched, heaved a deep sigh; in a minute he began to stammer out—

“Who is there? What do you want?” But no answer came.

“It was a dream,” he said, falling back upon his heather couch. “I must have been lying upon my back. There is nothing at all in dreams and nightmares—nothing! nothing!”

But in the midst of the restored silence the same doleful cry was again repeated—

“Dröckteufel! Dröckteufel!”

And as Maître Bernard, fairly beside himself, was preparing for instant flight, but with his face to the wall, and unable to move from his couch, the voice, in a dissonant chant, with pauses and strange accents, went on—

“The Queen Faileube, espoused to our king, Chilperic—Queen Faileube, learning that Septimanie, the governess of the young princes, had conspired against the king’s life—Queen Faileube said to the lord, ‘My lord, the viper waits until you are asleep to give you a mortal wound. She has conspired with Sinnégisile and Gallomagus against your life! She has poisoned her husband, your faithful Jovius, to live with Dröckteufel. Let your anger come down upon her like lightning, and your vengeance with a bloody sword!’ And Chilperic, assembling all his council in the castle of Nideck, said,

‘We have cherished a viper; she has plotted our death. Let her be out into three pieces. Let Dröckteufel, Sinnégisile, and Gallomagus perish with her! Let the ravens rejoice!’ And the vassals cried, ‘So let it be! The wrath of Chilperic is an abyss into which his enemies fall and perish!’ Then Septimanie was brought to be put to the torture and examined; a ring of iron was bound around her temples; it was tightened; her eyes started; her blood-dropping mouth murmured, ‘Lord king, I have offended. Dröckteufel, Gallomagus, and Sinnégisile have also conspired!’ And the following night a festoon of corpses dangled and swung from the towers of Nideck! The foul birds of prey rejoiced over the rich spoil. Dröckteufel, what would I not have done for thee? I would have had thee King of Austrasia, and thou hast forgotten me!”

The guttural voice sank down, and my uncle Bernard, more dead than alive, breathing a sigh of terror, murmured—

“Oh, I have never done anybody any wrong! I am only a poor old chronicler! Let me not die without absolution, far from the succour of the Church!”

The great wooden box full of heather seemed at every effort to escape to sink deeper and deeper. The poor man thought he was going down into a gulf, when, happily, Christian reappeared, crying—

“Well, Maître Bernard, what did I say? here is the storm.”

And now the hut was for an instant full of dazzling light, and my worthy uncle, who was lying facing the door, could see the whole valley lighted up, with its innumerable fir-trees crowded along the slopes down the valley as close as the grass of the fields, its rocks piled up on the banks of the river, which was rolling its sulphurous blue waves over the rounded boulders of the ravine, and the towers of Nideck rising proudly in the air fifteen hundred feet above.

Then the darkness covered all up again. That was the first flash.

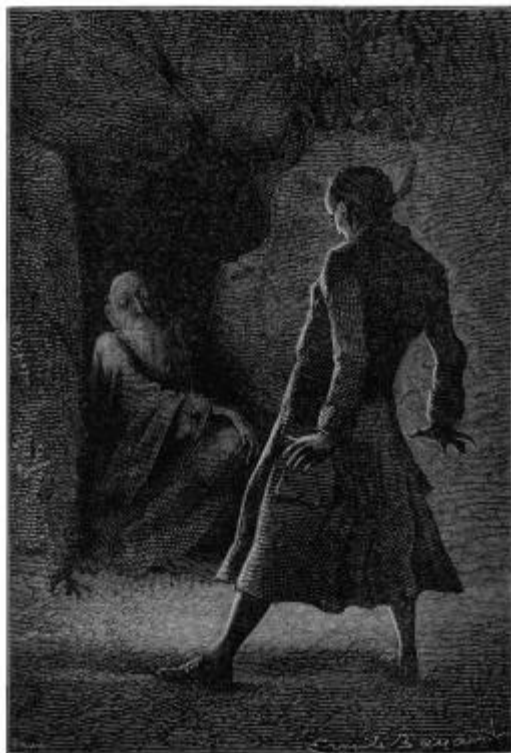
But in that instant of time he caught sight of a strange figure crouching at the end of the hut without being able to make out what it really was.

Great drops were beginning to patter on the roof.

Christian lighted a rush, and seeing Maître Bernard with his hands convulsively clutching the edge of his box of heather, and his face covered with beads of cold sweat, he cried—

“Why! Master Bernard! what is the matter with you?”

But, without answering, he merely pointed to the figure huddled up in the corner; it was an old woman, so very advanced in extreme old age, so yellow and wrinkled, with such a hooked nose, fingers so skinny, and lips so lean, that she looked like an old owl with all its feathers gone. There were only a few hairs left on the back of her head; the rest of her skull was as bare of covering as an egg. A threadbare ragged linen gown covered her poor skeleton figure. She was sightless, and the expression of her face was one of constant reverie.



“She looked like an old owl with all its feathers gone.”

Christian, noticing my uncle’s inquiring look, turned his head and said quietly—

“It’s old Irmengarde, the old teller of legends. She is waiting to die till the old tower falls into the torrent.”

Uncle Bernard, stupefied, looked at the woodman; he did not seem inclined to joke; on the contrary, he looked serious.

“Come, Christian,” said the good man, “you mean to have your joke.”

“Joke! no indeed, old and feeble as you see her, that old woman knows everything; the spirit of the ruins is in her. She was living when the old lords of the castle lived.”

Now my old uncle was very nearly falling backwards at this astounding disclosure.

“But what do you mean?” he cried; “the castle of Nideck has been down these thousand years!”

“What if it was two thousand years?” said the woodman, making the sign of the cross as a new flash lighted up the valley; “what does that prove? The spirit of the ruins lives in her. A hundred and eight years Irmengarde has lived with this spirit in her. Before her it was in old Edith of Haslach; before Edith in some other—”

“Do you believe that?”

“Do I believe it! It is as sure, Master Bernard, as that the sun will be back in three hours’ time. Death is night, life is day. After night comes day, then night again, and so on without end. The sun is the soul of the sky, the great spirit that is in us all, and the souls of the saints are like the stars which shine in the night, and which will never cease to return.”

Bernard Hertzog replied not another word, but having risen, he began suspiciously to consider the aspect of that aged woman, who sat still in a niche carved out of the rock. He noticed above

the niche some rough carving on the stone representing three trees with their branches touching, and forming a sort of crown; lower down were three toads cut in the granite. Three trees are the arms of the Tribocci (*dreien büchen*), three toads are the arms of the Merovingian kings.

What was the surprise of the old chronicler! Covetousness now took the place of alarm.

“Here,” thought he, “is the oldest monument of the Frankish race in Gaul. That old woman reminds me of some fallen queen, left here a relic of ages long gone by. But how am I to carry the niche away?”

He began to consider.

Then was heard far away in the woods the trampling of the hoofs of many cattle and deep bellowings. The rain fell faster; the flashes of lightning, like flights of frightened birds in the dark, touched each other by the tips of their wings; one never waited for another to be gone, and the rolling of the thunder became incessant and terrible.

Soon the storm reached the very gorge of Nideck and hung over it closely, and swooped down with implacable fury; the explosions succeeded each other without intermission. It seemed as if the very mountains were falling.

At every fresh crash Uncle Bernard shrank, feeling as if the lightning were coming down his back.

“The first Triboccus who built a hut to cover his head was no fool,” thought he. “He was a sensible man, with some experience of atmospheric changes. What would have become of us in this emergency had we not a roof over our heads? We should be greatly to be pitied. The invention of that Triboccus was quite as useful as that of the steam-engine; what a pity his name is not known!”

The worthy man had scarcely concluded his reflections when a young maiden of sixteen, wearing a very wide-brimmed straw hat, her white skirts dripping with rain, and her little bare feet covered with sand, advanced to the doorstep, and said—

“The Lord bless you!”

“Amen,” answered Christian solemnly.

This young girl was of the purest Scandinavian type, with cheeks of rose pink upon a face of pure whiteness, and long waving tresses, so fair and so silky that the finest wheat straw would hardly bear comparison with it. Her figure was tall and slender, and her blue eyes beamed with inexpressible sweetness.

Maître Bernard stood a few moments in rapt admiration, and the woodman, kindly addressing, the young girl, said—

“I am glad to see you, Fuldrade. Irmengarde is still asleep. What a storm it is! Is it coming to an end yet?”

“Yes, the wind is driving it down to the plain. It will be over before daylight.”

Then, without looking at Maître Bernard, she went to sit before the old woman, who now seemed to revive.

“Fuldrade,” she murmured, “is the great tower yet standing?”

“Yes.”

The aged woman bowed her head, and her lips moved.

After the last thunderclaps the rain fell in torrents. All down the valley was heard an incessant loud beating of falling sheets of rain, and the rushing of the swollen stream, then, at intervals, after a brief cessation of rain, again the heavier dashing of repeated and more violent showers.

Between the heavy showers the tinkling which Uncle Bernard had distinguished in the distance when he awoke gradually became more distinct, and at last arrived under the window of the hut,

and almost immediately five long-horned head of beautiful cows, spotted equally with white and black, appeared at the door.

“Why! here’s Waldine!” cried Christian, laughing; “she is looking for you, Fuldrade.”

The gentle creature calmly and quietly came straight in, and seemed to examine old Irmengarde.

“Go away!” cried Fuldrade; “go along with the others!”

And the obedient heifer turned back to the cabin door.

But the falling floods seemed to give her matter for reflection, for she stood quietly there, contemplating the deluge, and slowly swinging her beautiful head, lowing in a deep, subdued tone.

The fresh air was now penetrating the hut and bringing with it the sweet perfumes of honeysuckle and wild roses, excited by the freshening rain. All the birds in the woods—redbreasts, thrushes, and blackbirds—formed a concert under the trees; the air was filled with the little love-tings of the happy birds and the fluttering of their eager wings.

Then Maître Bernard, recovering from his reverie, took a few paces outside, raised his eyes, and contemplated the white and fleecy clouds hastily crossing the still troubled sky. On the hill opposite he could see the whole herd of cattle, all lying sheltered beneath the overhanging rocks, some lazily extended, their knees bent beneath them, with sleepy eyes; others, with neck outstretched, lowing solemnly. A few young animals were gazing at the hanging festoons of honeysuckle, and seemed to enjoy the balmy air that wafted from them.

All these diverse forms and attitudes stood clearly out upon the reddish background of the rock; and the immense expanded vault of the cavern, with its setting of oak and pine whose twisted roots appeared where they had pierced through the rock, gave a majestic air of grandeur to the spectacle.

“Well, Maître Bernard,” cried Christian, “it is broad daylight; had we not better start?”

Then, speaking to Fuldrade, who seemed buried in thought—

“Fuldrade, this old gentleman cannot drink our kirschwasser, yet I cannot offer him water. Have you anything better?”

Fuldrade took up a milk-pail, and, with an intelligent glance at Christian, went out.

“Wait a moment,” she said; “I shall be here directly.”

She rapidly tripped over the wet meadow; the drops of rain, collecting in the large leaves, poured about her feet in little crystal streams. At her approach to the cave the finest cows arose up as if to greet their young mistress. She patted them all, and, having seated herself began to milk one, a fine white cow, which, standing motionless, with eyes half-closed, seemed grateful for the preference.

When her pail was full Fuldrade made haste back, and, presenting it to Bernard, said, smiling—“Drink as much as you like; that is the way we drink milk warm from the cow in the country.”

Which was done at once, the good man thanking her many times, and praising the excellence of this frothy milk, flavoured, as it were, with the wild aromatic plants of the Schnéeberg.

Fuldrade seemed pleased with his eulogiums, and Christian, who had slipped on his blouse, standing behind them, staff in hand, waited for the end of these compliments before he cried—

“Now, master, *en route!* We have plenty of water now to turn the mill for six weeks without stopping, and I must be back by nine o’clock.”

And they started, following the gravelly road under the hill.

“Adieu!” said Maître Bernard to the young girl, who gently bowed her head without speaking; “farewell! and may God make you always happy!”

The next day, about six in the evening, Bernard Hertzog, having returned to Saverne, was seated before his writing-desk, and describing in his chapter upon the antiquities of the Dagsberg, his discovery of the Merovingian arms in the woodman’s hut in the Nideck. Then he went on to prove that the name of Tribocci, or Triboques, was derived from the German *drei büchen*—that is, three beeches. As a convincing proof, he referred to the three trees and the three toads of Nideck, which latter our kings have converted into three *fleurs-de-lis*.

All the antiquaries of Alsace envied him this admirable and interesting discovery. On both banks of the Rhine he was known as doctor, doctissimus, eruditus Bernardus, under which triumphal titles he dilated with honest pride, while he tried to bear his honours with becoming gravity.

And now, my dear friends, if you are curious to know what became of old Irmengarde, refer to the second volume of Bernard Hertzog’s *Archæological Annals*, where under date July 16, 1836, you will find the following statement:—

“The old teller of legends, Irmengarde, surnamed ‘*The Soul of the Ruins*,’ died last night in the hut of the woodman Christian. Wonderful to relate, in the very same hour, almost the same minute, the principal tower of Nideck fell, and was washed away by the waterfall below.

“Such is the end of the most ancient monument known of Merovingian architecture, of which Schlosser, the historian, says,” &c., &c.