

Wolkmar and His Dog

By Dr Nathan Drake

E'quanto à dir qualera, è cosa dura,
Questa "valle" selvaggia ed aspra e forte
Che nel pensier rinnuova la paura.—
Tanto è amara, che pocco è più morte:
Ma per trattar del ben, ch'i vi trovai,
Dirò del altre cose, ch'i v'ho scorte.—DANTE.

The place I know not, where I chanc'd to rove;
It was a "vale" so wild, it wounds me sore
But to remember with what ills I strove:
Such still my dread, that death is little more.
But I will tell the good which there I found:
High things 'twas there my fortune to explore.—HAYLEY

It was evening, when Wolkmar and his dog, almost spent with fatigue, descended one of the mountains in Switzerland; the sun was dilated in the horizon, and threw a tint of rich crimson over the waters of a neighbouring lake; on each side rocks of varied form, their green heads glowing in the beam, were swarded with shrubs that hung feathering from their summits, and, at intervals, was heard the rushing of a troubled stream.

Amid this scenery, our traveller, far from any habitation, wearied, and uncertain of the road, sought for some excavation in the rock, wherein he might repose himself, and having at length discovered such a situation, fell fast asleep upon some withered leaves. His dog sat watching at his feet, a small bundle of linen and a staff were placed beside him, and the red rays of the declining sun, having pierced through the shrubs that concealed the retreat, gleamed on the languid features of his beloved master.

And long be thy rest, O Wolkmar! may sleep sit pleasant on thy soul! Unhappy man! war hath estranged thee from thy native village; war, unnatural war, snatched thee from thy Fanny and her infant. Where art thou, best of wives? thy Wolkmar lives! report deceived thee, Daughter of affliction! for the warrior rests not in the narrow house. Thou fled'st; thy beauty caught the eye of power; thou fled'st with thy infant and thy aged father. Unhappy woman! thy husband seeketh thee over the wilds of Switzerland. Long be thy rest, O Wolkmar; may sleep sit pleasant on thy soul.

Yet not long did Wolkmar rest; starting, he beheld the dog, who, seizing his coat, had shook it with violence; and having thoroughly awakened him, whining licked his face, and sprang through the thicket. Wolkmar, eagerly following, discerned at some distance a man gently walking down the declivity of the opposite hill, and his own dog running with full speed towards him. The sun yet threw athwart the vale rays of a blood-red hue, the sky was overcast, and a few big round drops rustled through the drooping leaves. Wolkmar sat him down, the dog now fawned upon the man, then bounding ran before him. The curiosity of Wolkmar was roused, he rose to meet the stranger, who, as he drew near, appeared old, very old, his steps scarce supporting with a staff; a blue mantle was wrapped around him, and his hair and beard, white as snow, and waving to the breeze of the hill, received from beneath a dark cloud, the last deep crimson of the setting sun.

The dog now ran wagging his tail, first to his master, and then to the stranger, leaping upon each with marks of the utmost rapture, till too rudely expressing his joy, the old man tottering fell at the foot of a blasted beech, that stood at the bottom of the hill. Wolkmar hastened to his relief, and had just reached the spot, when starting back, he exclaimed, "My father, O my father!" Gothre, for so the old man was called, saw and knew his son, a smile of extacy lighted up his features, a momentary colour flushed his cheek, his eyes beamed transport through the waters that suffused them, and stretching forth his arms, he faintly uttered, "My beloved son!" Nature could no more: the bloom upon his withered cheek fled fast away, the dewy lustre of his eye grew dim, the throbbing of his heart oppressed him, and straining Wolkmar with convulsive energy, the last long breath of aged Gothre fled cold across the cheek of his son.

The night grew dark and unlovely, the moon struggled to appear, and by fits her pale light streamed across the lake, a silence deep and terrible prevailed, unbroken but by a wild shriek, that at intervals died along the valley. Wolkmar lay entranced upon the dead body of his father, the dog stood motionless by his side; but, at last alarmed, he licked their faces, and pulled his master by the coat, till having in vain endeavoured to awaken them, he ran howling dreadfully along the valley; the demon of the night trembled on his hill of storms, and the rocks returned a deepening echo.

Wolkmar at length awoke, a cold sweat trickled over his forehead, every muscle shook with horror, and, kneeling by the body of Gothre, he wept aloud. "Where is my Fanny," he exclaimed, "Where shall I find her; oh! that thou hadst told me she yet lived, good old man! if alive, my God, she must be near: the night is dark, these mountains are unknown to me." As he spoke, the illumined edge of a cloud shone on the face of Gothre, a smile yet dwelt upon his features; "Smilest thou, my father," said Wolkmar, "I feel it at my heart; all shall yet be well." The night again grew dark, and Wolkmar, retiring a few paces from his father, threw himself on the ground.

He had not continued many minutes in this situation, before the distant sound of voices struck his ear; they seemed to issue from different parts of the valley; two or three evidently approached the spot where Gothre lay, and the name of Gothre was at length loudly and frequently repeated. Wolkmar, starting from the ground, sighed with anxiety and expectation, leaning forward, he would have listened, but the beating of his heart appalled him. The dog who, at first alarmed, had crept to his master's feet, began now to bark with vehemence; suddenly the voices ceased, and Wolkmar thought he heard the soft and quick tread of people fast approaching. At this moment, the moon burst from behind a dark cloud, and shone full on the dead body of Gothre. A shrill shriek pierced the air, and a young woman rushing forward fell on the body of Gothre. "Oh, my Billy," she exclaimed to a little boy, who ran up to her out of breath, "see your beloved Gothre! he is gone for ever, gone to heaven and left us. O my poor child!" clasping the boy, who cried most bitterly, "what shall we do without him, what will become of us—we will die also, my Billy!"

Wolkmar, in the mean time, stood enveloped with shade, his arms stretched out, motionless, and fixed in silent astonishment; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he faintly and with difficulty uttered, "My Fanny, my child!" His accents reached her ear, she sprang wildly from the ground, "It is my Wolkmar's spirit," she exclaimed. The sky instantly cleared all around, and Wolkmar burst upon her sight. They rushed together; she fainted. "God of mercies," cried Wolkmar, "if thou wilt not drive me mad, restore her to life:—she breathes, I thank thee, O my God, she breathes! the wife of Wolkmar lives!" Fanny recovering, felt the warm embrace of her beloved husband; "dear, dear Wolkmar," she faintly whispered, "thy Fanny—I cannot

“speak—my Wolkmar, I am too happy—see our Billy!” The Boy had crept close to his father, and was clasping him round the knees. The tide of affection rushed impetuously through the bosom of Wolkmar, “it presses on my heart,” he said, “I cannot bear it.” The domestics, whom Fanny had brought with her for protection, crowded round. “Let us kneel,” said Wolkmar, “round the body of aged Gothre.” They knelt around; the moon shone sweetly on the earth, and the Spirit of Gothre passed by—he saw his children and was happy.