

The Weaver of Steinbach

By Unknown

‘You talk about mountains,’ said the old weaver. Heinrich, to me one day, smiling with a melancholy air, ‘but if you wish to see a high mountain, you cannot do so here, by Saverne. You must go to Dagsberg, down from there to Nidech, to Haslach, mount to Saint-Dié, to Gerardmer, to Retournemer. There you will find a mountain covered with trees—all trees, rocks, lakes, and precipices.

‘They say that there is now a good road over the Honeck, but I can hardly believe it. The mountain is over five thousand feet high, and there is snow upon it even in the month of July. Its sides descend perpendicularly to the Munster defile, immense black rocks, rugged, and bristling with fir-trees, which to one looking up from below appear like ferns. From the top you can see, on the German side, the valley of Alsace, the Rhine, the Swiss Alps; looking towards France, you see the lakes of Retournemer, of Longemer, and several mountains—mountains without number!

‘How often have I hunted in that beautiful country! How many hares have I killed there; how many roebucks, wild boars, on those wooded slopes; how many weasels, martens, and wild-cats on the heath; how many trout have I caught in its waters! Every one knew me from Schirmeck to Gerardmer. “Here is Heinrich,” they would say, “with his chaplet of thrushes and tomtits.” Then they would make a place for me at the table. They would cut me a great slice of home-baked bread, which seemed always to have just come out of the oven. They would place before me the cheese, and would fill up my glass with the white wine of Alsace. The pretty girls would come and lean their hands on my shoulders, girls with *retroussé* noses, red lips, and fresh cheeks, while the old folk would hold out their hands and say to me, “Well, Heinrich, shall we have good weather for the day’s mowing! Shall we drive the hogs to the forest, the oxen to the meadow?” The old women, too, would put their brooms aside behind the door, and would come and ask news of me.

‘Sometimes, as I left them, I would hang up in the kitchen an old hare with long yellow teeth, with hair as red as dried moss, or, in winter I would hang up some game that it would be necessary to expose three days to the frost before one could get one’s teeth in it. That was sufficient; I was always welcome, and had always a corner at the table. Ah! those were happy days, fine folk, fine country of the Vosges.’

‘Why then, Heinrich,’ I asked, ‘did you leave that fine country, since you loved it so much?’

‘Well, M. Christian, a man is never happy. My sight became clouded, my hand commenced to shake. More than one hare escaped my aim. Then there began to arrive every day fresh gamekeepers. They were always putting up new cottages for the foresters. There were more processes out against me than an ass would be able to carry on its back to the court. The gendarmes were after me, and looking for me everywhere. Faith, it was time for me to leave, so I took to the threal and the shuttle, and I have done well. I do not repent it; no, I do not repent it.’

The face of the old man became clouded, and, rising from his seat, he walked slowly up and down the little room, his hands behind his back, his cheeks pale, and his eyes fixed before him. I seemed to see an old toothless wolf; with worn-out claws, who had given up the chase and taken to eating *bouilli*.

From time to time his cheeks twitched nervously, and the last rays of the sun lingering on the weaver's loom and upon the old wall, and lighting up the old engravings of Montbeliard, gave to the place a strange mysterious charm.

All of a sudden he stopped in his walk, and, looking me in the face, said abruptly—

'Well, yes, I would rather have died in the middle of the woods under the open sky than have become this, but there was another reason!'

He sat down by the little window and, looking towards the sun, said—

'One day in the autumn of 1827, about eleven o'clock in the evening, I set out from Gerardmer my gun upon my shoulder, to go to Schlonck, a wild spot between Honeck and the mountain of Genieses. There, one could see in the morning flocks of birds of prey wheeling around—sparrow-hawks, buzzards, and sometimes eagles which had gone astray in the mountain mists. As the eagles generally found their way back as soon as day began to break, it was necessary if one wished to capture them, to be at the place very early. One also found there martens wild-cats pole-cats, and weasels, which lived upon the eggs, and played about at the bottom of the caverns.

I was in the defile at two in the morning, and I followed a little path which it required one to know well in order to tread in safety, for it ran along the edge of precipices. Masses of damp fern grew at the foot of the rocks, and three hundred feet below were the tops of the highest fir-trees.

'At that hour, however, one could see none of this. The night was as dark as an oven, and only a few stars glistened in the sky.

'About me I could hear the shrill cry of the martens. These animals run about at night like rats, and when it is moonlight you may sometimes see two, three, or more, following one another, and running up the rocks as quickly as they can run upon the ground.

'While waiting for day I sat down at the foot of an oak, and lit my pipe. The air was so still that not a leaf stirred, and one might almost have thought that everything around was dead.

'When I had sat there perhaps a quarter of an hour, dreaming about all manner of things, all of a sudden I thought I saw, at the bottom of the gulf, a light by the rock.

'“What can it be?” I said to myself.

'A minute afterwards the light became brighter, and gleamed upon the branches of some of the trees whose shadows danced upon the torrent of Tonhelbach. Some black figures appeared around the flame, going and coming like ants. Some gipsies had encamped at the foot of the rock, and had lit their fire in order to prepare their breakfast before going on their way.

'You cannot imagine, M. Christian, how beautiful was that camp at the bottom of the precipice. The old dried trees, the trailing ivy, the brambles, and the honeysuckle which hung from the rock! A thousand reflections appeared in the foam of the torrent, and died away, and their strange glimmering danced under the foliage of the great oaks like the dance of the wandering fires upon the Blokesberg

'From the height where I was it seemed to me like a great picture, a painting of fire and of gold, with a background of deep shadows

'For a long time I remained there thinking, saying to myself that men in the midst of woods and of mountains were like poor insects in moss. A thousand other ideas seemed to occur to me.

'In the end I slipt down between two rocks by means of the bushes, and descended by the Krappenfels slope, in order to see the strangers more closely. As, however the slope became steeper, I stopped again by a tree about a thousand feet above the gipsies.

'I saw then an old woman sitting by a fire. The flame lighted up her profile. Her long lean arms were round her knees, and her eyes were on a pot. Three or four children, almost naked, played about her like frogs. A little way off, women and men, sitting in the shade, were getting ready for

their journey. They rose, ran about, approached the fire to throw upon it fresh leaves, and, as they cast on more and more, great clouds of gray smoke rose above the valley.

‘While I calmly looked on, a fiendish thought struck me, an idea which made me laugh to myself.

‘“Ha!” said I, “suppose now a great stone were suddenly to fall in the middle of that crew, how that old woman with the hooked nose would stare, and how the others would open their eyes! Ha! Ha! It would be comic!”

I thought, however, how it would be a crime to take a stone and roll it upon the gipsies, who had done me no harm.

‘“Yes,” I said, “it would be abominable. I should never forgive myself.”

‘By ill-luck I found a great stone lying just at my foot. I touched it with my foot; it was loose.’

Then Heinrich paused. He was very pale. At the end of a second or two he went on—‘You see, M. Christian, for all one may say to the contrary, hunting is a diabolical passion. It develops the murderous instincts which lie hidden in the recesses of our hearts, and in the end makes us find pleasure in evil work. If I had not been accustomed to shedding blood during more than thirty years, the idea of taking the life of one of those poor gipsies would have made my hair stand on end. I should have left the spot so as not to give way to the temptation, but the habit of killing had made me cruel, and at length, I must say, a fiendish curiosity chained me to the place.

‘I imagined how astonished the gipsies would be—their mouths open, running here and there, holding up their hands, calling out, crawling on all-fours in the midst of the rocks. Their figures would be so comic, their contortions so amusing! In spite of myself my foot went softly forward, softly, and started the large piece of rock along the slope.

‘It rolled away.

‘At first it rolled a little to one side, and went on slowly. I could have caught it back, and I was about to dart after it, but the second turn it made was to a steeper part of the declivity, and the stone leapt three feet, then six, then twelve! I felt myself become pale, and my legs trembled. The rock bounded, fell, it was just in a line with the fire. I saw it leap up, then lost sight of it, and I heard it crash on like a wild boar. It was horrible.

‘I cried out—a cry which made the mountain ring. The gipsies looked up. It was too late. At that instant the rock bounded into the air for the last time, and the fire was extinguished.

Heinrich was silent, and looked at me with a haggard face. The perspiration stood upon his brow. I said nothing, and bent my head, for I dared not look upon him.

After some moments the old poacher went on—

‘That was what I did, M. Christian and you are the first I have told it to, since I confessed to the old curé Gottlieb, of Schirmeck two years afterwards. The curé said to me, “Heinrich, the love of blood has ruined you—you have killed a poor old woman for the sake of a laugh. It is a terrible crime. Lay down your gun there. Work instead of slaying, and perhaps God may yet pardon you. As for me, I am unable to absolve you.” I knew that he was right, that the hunting had ruined me. I gave my dog to the bootmaker at Chêorchof I laid my gun against the wall. I took to the shuttle and here I am.’

He was silent

So we sat for a long time, the one opposite the other, without exchanging a word. Night had fallen, and a silence like that of death hovered over the village of Steinbach; far off, very far off, upon the road to Saverne, a heavy carriage, drawn at a gallop, went on its way with a clatter.

Towards nine o’clock the moon began to appear behind the Schnéeberg, and I rose to go. The old Poacher accompanied me to the door of his little house.

‘Do you not think, M. Christian,’ said he, taking my hand, ‘that God will pardon me?’
His voice trembled.

‘If you have suffered much, Heinrich. To suffer is to expiate.’

He looked at me for a while, without speaking.

‘If I have suffered much!’ he said at last bitterly. ‘If I have suffered much! Ah! M. Christian, can you think I have not? Could a hawk ever be happy in a cage? It is impossible. One need feed it with nice bits to keep it from being sad! It looks upon the sky, through the bars of its cage. Its wings quiver, and it dies! Well! for ten years I have been like that hawk.’

He was silent once more, and then, all of a sudden, as if transported out of himself—‘Oh,’ cried he, ‘the high mountains! the great forests the solitude! the life in the woods!’

He held out his arms towards the far-off peaks of the Vosges, the black masses of which could be seen in the distance, and the great tears filled his eyes.

‘Poor old man!’ I said, as I left him. ‘Poor old man!’

And, full of thought, I strode along the little path which runs by the side of the heath.